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THE ENEMY AGENT

"An enemy agent, active and virulent, spying in the heart of London. A dangerous man at liberty, not even suspect—so it would seem."

Such is the engrossing theme of this novel, which deals with the thrilling game of counter-espionage in connection with the Morris Case—the machinations of a daring patriot known to the authorities as "the Balkan Spider". How Colonel Alderson plays at diamond cut diamond gives an ingenious twist to the story, providing a background of unique interest in the hitherto unrecorded life behind the scenes at the Postal Censor's office. The final outwitting of the spies by the exploits of one man may be attributed to the powerful significance of three words—"opened by censor". THE ENEMY AGENT is a novel rich in incident and dramatic effect from first to last.

By the same Author

Biographical, etc.

ANTOINETTE STERLING AND OTHER CELEBRITIES
GARCIA THE CENTENARIAN AND HIS TIMES
THE SINGING VOICE AND ITS TRAINING
LIGHT OPERA, THEATRECRAFT
ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF LIGHT OPERA

Fiction

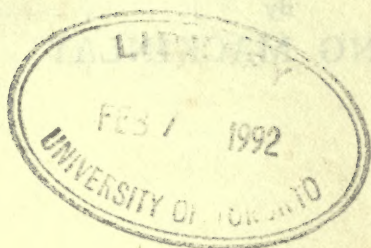
REPARATION

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THE ENEMY AGENT

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To
MY FRIENDS
AMONG
THE POSTAL CENSORS



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THE ENEMY AGENT

CHAPTER I

LEOPARD SPOTS

AN Enemy Agent, active and virulent, spying in the heart of London. A dangerous man at liberty, not even suspect—so it would seem. And War marching midway through a fourth year of fearfulness.

Maurice Porloff was enemy born, enemy bred, enemy in intention and desire, but none of these facts appeared on the registration card with which he had been duly provided.

On the contrary, his name was set down as Paul Morris; nationality, English; business, Export agent; address, 315, Jermyn Street, Piccadilly.

In short, the Bulgarian Secret-Service man was safely installed in an enemy country, camouflaged as a naturalized inhabitant "of no mean city".

His foreign sounding vowels, his dark Balkan colouring mattered not at all as long as he could say:

"Am I not a good Britisher?" A cynical jest!

At the memory of his latest success, the enemy agent passed his fingers over his lower cheek and heavy jaw with caressing satisfaction. Doing so, he caught sight of himself in the small mirror hung above the writing-table. It was an artful arrangement which enabled him at any time to keep an eye

on the rest of the room, even while his back was turned.

"Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the Leopard his spots?"

The saying leapt to the forefront of his mind, as he saw reflected his black hair and swarthy complexion. Then an ugly smile gleamed in his narrowed eyes and wrinkled the furrows of his face.

"Or the Tiger—his stripes?"

The last words were hissed softly, as though by sound they sought the subtle commendation of his ears. Snake-like, his tongue curved about his lips. He exuded a little venomous laugh.

"Stripes!"

Almost as he repeated the word, the syncopated knock of the postman was heard at the street door below, and rising from his seat at the typewriter he descended to the front hall.

Producing a small, thin key secured to the leather strap worn on his forearm, he proceeded to unlock his private letter-box. Then, glancing swiftly at the postmarks on the dozen or more envelopes, he nodded with satisfaction. The agents were well up to time with their promised reports from along the South Coast. The details devoted to movements of troops and shipping would all be there, suitably disguised, of course, by that code of alternative expressions which had long ago been prepared for the day when the God of War should stride through Europe, torch in hand.

"All's well with the world," Morris quoted softly to himself with a taunting sneer, and certainly all seemed to be going uncommonly well with his own particular world of espionage.

His quick ear caught the tap of approaching footsteps from the basement, and at once he closed the private letter-box. He had already thrust the correspondence out of sight in the flap-pocket of his jacket when the stocky figure of his butler-valet emerged from the narrow, ill-lighted staircase.

"I think there is something for you, Blake!" As Morris addressed the manservant, he jerked his head towards a general letter-box where a small envelope could be seen peeping from behind the wire cage.

Instinct made Blake aware of an official atmosphere about the communication, and he removed it with an expressive head-shake.

"Call-up notice, sir. Recognized it as soon as I clapped eyes on it. Been expecting it for days."

After he had read it through, there was a slight silence, and then:

"That means I shall be leaving you, sir, almost at once. But my wife will carry on. She knows your ways as well as I do, so I don't think your arrangements will be very much upset."

"All the same, I shall be sorry to lose you. But—" a tiny flame flashed in Morris's eyes and vanished again—"they'll be needing large reinforcements over there. I should have been in France myself long ago, had it not been for—my heart trouble."

He omitted to mention that before the medical examination he had doctored himself with a drug of suitable qualities.

"It was rare hard lines for you, sir."

Blake sounded so genuinely sympathetic that his master gave a really most convincing sigh before replying.

"Still, we can all find our different—spheres of

usefulness in these times. Even though some of us are only C3, while others, no older than ourselves, are 'A'." He indicated the butler with an assumption of deference.

At that moment the clock struck three in the tower of a neighbouring church, and his manner changed.

"What about the coffee?"

At once the manservant was all apology. "Mrs. Blake was seeing to it, when the post came. I thought there'd be just time for me to slip up to the hall without your being kept waiting."

He turned on his master a gaze of reproach.

"You ordered it for 'three o'clock', sir."

Morris nodded agreement.

"I'm not blaming you in the least. If there has been any delay, it is my fault for detaining you."

"It should be ready by now, sir."

The aroma reached their nostrils from the basement.

"I want it extra black to-day, Blake, and as strong as possible. The last batches of letters have been heavy ones, and they will keep me busy till dinner. Very busy indeed."

"I understand, sir. Then you mean that—supposing someone wants to see you—most particular——"

"On no account disturb me. If anyone comes, send them away, whoever they may be. Tell them to write, or to ring me up. Not till this evening, though. After dinner. Make that clear."

With these last instructions, Morris turned on his heel and went back to the sitting-room.

By the time that the butler had followed him upstairs with the coffee ten minutes later, the room

was already heavy with the fumes of a strong cigar. Terribly strong, it seemed to Blake. "Something cruel", he muttered to himself as he opened the door, and encountered the smoke-screen.

The particular brand to which Morris confined himself constituted one of the major tragedies of Blake's position. Fate had robbed him of a perquisite sanctioned by long tradition among the "Manners and Customs of Master and Man".

Where the cigars had come from, he had no idea! Where they could go to, he had stated to his wife in clear, crisp terms which permitted of no possible misconception. Having done so, he applied himself to the perversion of a proverb.

"One man's smoke is another man's poison!"

However, the remark was not actually as devoid of adjectives as that. A deep sigh had followed his summing-up of the situation.

As Blake deposited the coffee-tray by his master's side he held his breath, endeavouring to exclude the obnoxious tobacco fumes. "Them gas attacks must be something like this—only not as bad!" His flow of thoughts was interrupted by Morris's voice.

"Remember, I can see no one."

"Very good, sir." Blake softly closed the door behind him, as he went out.

For a few moments Morris sat motionless, waiting till his ears should register the click-clack of heels that would announce Blake's arrival on the ground floor.

Then he rose and carefully closed the outer door of the room, shooting the two bolts for additional safety. Afterwards the leather padded inner door was fastened with equal precision, and the key

turned in the lock. He was alone, secure from interruption.

Several hours of strenuous work demanding his closest attention lay before him. The mass of facts and figures collected by his secret agents during the previous seven days were about to be converted into a code letter, and this would be so framed as to pass through the Postal Censoring Office without discovery. Then, by a devious route, it would eventually reach the hands of Varaski, that mysterious head of the Bulgarian Secret-Service, in other words, the man whom Morris was serving, but had never met.

Before settling down to the preparation of the code message, he withdrew the afternoon's correspondence from his pocket, and glanced quickly at each letter in turn, checking them over in his mind one by one. The results satisfied him. His agents' reports from along the South Coast appeared to be "all present and correct". Present they certainly were, correct he hoped they would prove!

Indeed, Morris was sure they would do so, recalling the accuracy of information supplied on previous occasions. Opening a drawer of the writing-table, he put by this latest collection of correspondence until he should have carried out the task immediately in hand.

In a recess, on the far side of the room from the window, was hanging an oil painting. It was a landscape, dark in tone and gloomy in effect, entitled "The Storm."

To relegate a picture to so ill-lighted a position on the wall condemned him as a person devoid of artistic instinct, callers at his rooms had stated on

more than one occasion. He had tried to excuse himself by saying that the picture was hung there for certain associations, not through any special merit. "Besides," he would point out, "it has its uses." As they could see for themselves, it fitted extremely well into the recess.

Having closed the drawer of the writing-table, Morris crossed to the picture, and removed it from the brass-headed nail on which it was suspended. That done, he quickly revealed the truth about "its uses". Grasping the nail firmly, he slid aside the entire section of the panelling, thereby revealing a concealed safe beneath.

With sure fingers, he manipulated the combination.

"4R: 5L: 1R: 1L: 5R: 4L."

Not hard to remember. After a concluding turn to the left the door swung open, and inserting his hand, he took out a bundle of papers. Those were followed by some half-dozen sheets of foolscap, covered with sentences, words and figures, written in a firm hand.

Carrying them over to the table he began slowly to read through each in turn. Next, with the assistance of marginal notes, he started to check the different items, and compare them from time to time with the particular pages of different letters which he had noted down in the margin.

Everything being tested and verified with careful accuracy, he pressed strongly the centre of a square of inlay inside his writing-table. At once a small drawer shot out, and from this he abstracted a book whose leaves were of the thinnest Indian paper, and had, inscribed on them, full particulars of the code

that many years before had been arranged between Varaski and himself. Correspondence, in those happy days, when no censorship existed, had been simplicity itself.

With this small volume by his side, Morris began to transform his notes into the code, page by page, while as he did so the air grew thicker with the smoke of his cigars.

On and on he worked, almost without a pause, until at last the laborious process had been completed. The first portion of the information destined for England's enemies now appeared under a new cloak: it had been turned into a code disguised to elude the censor's vigilance, as the previous messages had done.

True, on three occasions during recent months, the code letters had failed to reach their intended destination in Eastern Europe. That, however, could doubtless be explained, Morris considered, by the increasing activity of U-boats in the Mediterranean. The missing letters probably had formed part of those mail-bags to the Adriatic, which, more than once, had been sunk without a trace. It must have been so! The rest of the secret communications had reached Varaski safely, after passing along the "underground" route prepared in co-operation by Morris and a Bulgarian expert.

When the code equivalent of the first half of this latest communication had been completed, Morris went over to his typewriter. He then proceeded to the next stage, the preparation of a typed copy of that portion of the message.

The task was a light one, indeed, compared with

what had gone previously, and it was not long before it was done.

Nodding, in satisfaction, he appended his signature, and passed on to the remainder of the message, which was to be consigned to paper in the form of secret writing.

This was not to be done by the ordinary process, since Morris employed a more intricate one, invented by a Bulgarian chemist, whose method yielded no results whatever when the ordinary tests were applied. So certain of immunity had Morris become by the time this part of the War had been reached, that he dismissed any risk of discovery with a contemptuous laugh.

Why trouble to use code for this final portion of the message? With a look of scorn in his eyes he wrote out the rest exactly as it was, without any concealment beyond that afforded by the chemical which rendered each sentence invisible.

In an hour he concluded his labours, and slipping the code letter into an envelope, he fastened the flap. Then, with a gleam in his eye of half-malice, half-amusement, he wrote down a certain name and address at an Adriatic port. The city in question was the point where it had been customary for his communications to enter on those strange journeys which, in the end, brought them into the hands of Varaski himself.

A few minutes later Morris strolled in leisurely fashion to the pillar-box, which was conveniently set at the nearest street corner, some thirty yards from his chambers.

As he was about to post the package that he had been at such pains to prepare, the church clock

started to sound. First he heard the four quarters with their notes in minor third, and then the lower-pitched monotone of the hour. This was seven times repeated, until the chimes ceased, yet still the enemy agent stood there, motionless. For what did he wait? Had some premonition stayed his action?

A moment later the postman approached the pillar-box, canvas bag slung over his shoulder.

Throwing off the lethargy that had weighed him down, Morris thrust the envelope through the slit, and heard it drop with a sullen thud.

At the sound, he thrust out a hand as though to recall the movement, but it was too late. Already the present had become the past, never to return.

CHAPTER II

THE POSTAL CENSORS

THERE was a curious electricity in the atmosphere at the Postal Censors' Office on the following day.

"A certain liveliness," as it was described by someone addicted to the use of phrases culled from official *communiqués*.

Whichever room one entered, one became aware of the same highly-strung nerviness, with its seeming impossibility of concentrating on work for more than a few minutes on end.

A vague unrest stirred the herd spirit of the place. All kinds of varied rumours, which yet bore a certain similarity, were passing in hurried whispers from mouth to mouth.

A good deal of vital news had reached the enemy through some channels which should not have been available. The present situation had not arisen in connection with the Western Front, but further afield with the southern portion of Middle Europe, Northern Italy bordering on the Adriatic, Macedonia, the Balkans, Greece, and Turkey.

There seemed no doubt that written statements, bearing most important details, had, in some way, been passing through the post, and this was the reason the censors came into the matter.

Movements of shipping and troops, details of armaments and supplies, and other plans and projects had become known before being put into

execution. It appeared that this must have been going on for weeks, probably for months, and the question as to whether it was the result of stupidity, criminal carelessness, or treachery was now being raised.

Twice in the last month special warnings had been issued by the head of the Censors' Office, and, on the instructions of the War Council, read out to the rooms concerned with these particular countries.

To-day a further stringent warning had gone forth. Whatever the exact truth might be about the rumours, it was obvious that there must be some foundation of fact.

One specially circumstantial report, concerned with the British Military Intelligence, seemed to be going round the building.

Some member of the Secret-Service was supposed to have wormed himself into a position of extreme confidence somewhere out in Bulgaria. This unknown man had actually seen a decoded copy of one of these treacherous messages, and similar ones, so he had been assured, were coming through with the utmost regularity.

What was more, he had learned that the envelope arrived with the usual label proclaiming it to have been "opened by censor number —."

There everyone came to an abrupt stop. A certain mutual respect existed among the staff, since, like Cæsar's wife, each must be above suspicion. Any other mode of existence was unthinkable.

How much truth was there in this story of the Secret-Service man in the Balkans?

No one could tell for certain.

How had it come through to England from the depths of that enemy country, so far away?

Those who knew would not say.

Those who said did not know.

When any of the censors themselves were questioned in detail as to the source of their knowledge, it almost invariably turned out that the story was formed of fragments from a hundred different sources. A word here, a phrase there. A hint. The raising of an eyebrow. The shaking of a head.

And yet—! And yet—! Rumours identical in general outline, varying only in particulars, had come to the knowledge of everyone in the building, from the most diminutive Boy Scout to the "great Panjandrum" himself.

The letters containing so much information of value to the enemy had obviously been passed through the post by someone at the censors. Had it been a case of careless oversight? Or— When that point was reached there would be a sudden snatching at the breath, and the missing of a heart-beat, followed by a prickly feeling down the spine.

The opening of the door to Room D 14 was so sudden that all the lady censors looked up with a start.

But it turned out to be nothing more alarming than one of the Boy Scouts, a recent addition, new enough to his position as messenger to be all anxiety to carry out the smallest job with the instant display of brisk alertness.

His eyes darted round till they picked out the sorter of the room.

"Here's the clips, miss, and the fresh blotting-paper."

A slim, fair girl rose from her place at one of the long tables, and came forward to take charge of his burden with a smile of appreciation.

"Thank you, Billie. How splendid of you. I never thought you could be as quick as that. It must have been nearly a record."

The note of approval in her voice brought a flush of gratification to his cheeks.

At that precise moment she heard her name called in a tone of authority, and turned at once in the direction of the Deputy Assistant Censor. The D.A.C., who was the official head of the room, was seated alone at a small table apart from her subordinates, since this provided the atmosphere of aloof remoteness, and remote aloofness so essential to anyone holding a Governmental position of small authority.

"Miss Marling."

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson?"

As Nesta Marling approached "the presence" in obedience to the summons, she moved with instinctive grace and exquisite refinement, for she possessed attributes which many of her associates envied and all admired.

Before the War a leading artist had captured this expression of her personality and transferred it to a canvas with singular felicity.

He had called the study "Poetry", and by general consent it was well named. The picture had been given a prominent position in one of the main rooms at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition of 1914.

Poetry! The title came back to her mind with a sense of the ridiculous, and suddenly she wondered

what phrase the painter would use to describe the scene which lay around her at that instant.

Glancing across the room she saw the long tables with their double rows of women bending over the correspondence, the untidy piles of unopened envelopes, and the labels bearing each the number of the particular censor, an outward and visible sign, which afterwards could not be denied.

Then came the baskets holding letters clipped to the blue slips or white ones, destined in one case for destruction and in the other, either for the code-room or for the heads of the department.

Near them lay the canvas post-bags, the brushes, the pots of ink, and the stamps for blacking out passages that could not be allowed to go through. The steaming kettle stood on the gas-ring for use in case of refractory packets, while heated irons were ready for making tests when secret messages were suspected.

Paste, scissors, letter-openers, magnifying-glasses, parcels, string, litter, sealing-wax, reference-books, mail-baskets, aprons, spectacles, and strained eyes, all came within her range of vision. She noted ash-trays, matches, cigarettes, tobacco-stained fingertips, ink-stained hands, and all the paraphernalia inseparable from the drudgery, comedy, tragedy, and thrill of a room devoted to the task of postal censoring.

Nesta could not restrain a wistful smile as the contrast impressed itself on her sensitive nature.

"Then and now."

Almost she could have envisaged two companion pictures, embodying the change wrought by those years of unending strife.

"Poetry—and Prose."

Mrs. Johnson roused her from her reverie.

"How are we off for white slips? The Scout had better wait while you find out. Ask about the blue ones at the same time."

As the sorter of the room it was part of Nesta's duty to see to such details of routine, and during the next two or three minutes she carried out a rapid tour of the tables, making inquiries of the occupants, who at times received her questions with none too good a grace.

Everyone was taking part in "a big push" to get the remains of yesterday's mail out of the way before another should bury them under a further avalanche of correspondence. The next postal delivery was due at almost any moment, and there was time for nothing but a moment's pause to light another cigarette. Chain-smoking had its advantages when there was a pressure like this.

Was there necessity for the driving hurry indicated by this feverish activity? Probably it was all part of the hectic atmosphere that pervaded the entire building. Concentration on work prevented one from thinking. It helped one to forget—for a little while at any rate—all those ugly rumours about the leakage of information.

At last Nesta had completed the round of the room, and after returning to the D.A.C. to make her report on the position, she resumed her seat, while ripples of amusement played about the corners of her mouth.

For a quarter of an hour there was a silence, only interrupted by the clip-clop of scissors, the slitting of envelopes, the scratching of nibs upon those

famous blue or white paper slips, and the bang-bang of the stamping as some dangerous passage was blacked out from an otherwise innocent letter.

Soon the concentrated striving of the room had its effect, and the letters still waiting attention from yesterday began to dwindle in number. Then, by unspoken universal consent, the strain became relaxed for the time being.

The moment was heralded by that small epidemic of coughs, a tickling of the imagination or of the throat, liable to pass through any assembly when attention is waning.

The sound was varied by an intermittent striking of matches and the pained interjections of those foolish virgins who put their faith in artificial lighters and remained in darkness.

"Misery" Minton, the dry humorist, then thought it was time to make her contribution to the situation. The particular method by which she was accustomed to achieve her effects consisted in the combination of comedy with a face and voice of intense gravity.

"Oh, my heavens!" she ejaculated, holding a letter up for the general inspection of the table, "pages and pages all about love. I've a good mind to send the letter for destruction. Shove along one of those blues."

"Don't be such an ass, 'Misery'," came the laughing reproof of "Smiles" Brighten, the clown of the party, who was in the next seat.

"All right, then," was the solemn response, "I won't do that. Instead, I'll censor the letter till its own mother wouldn't know it. Whenever the language looks like becoming overheated, I'll black

out the sentence and put a row of stars instead. 'Night of stars and night of love'."

She started to hum the "Barcarolle" from *Tales of Hoffmann* in a tone just sufficiently loud to be heard by the occupants of the table without being audible to the head of the room.

"Smiles" interrupted her with a giggle.

"I wonder they don't put you to sing in the front line. It would be twice as effective as any frightfulness they've tried so far. After you'd put up a vocal barrage for an hour or so I should say they could make a complete break through at any part of the line."

"Misery" discontinued the "Barcarolle" at a convenient point.

"Do you know, 'Smiles', it's rather curious your suggesting that. As a matter of fact, I offered to launch a song recital not long ago, and they called an emergency meeting of the War Council to consider the proposal. Eventually it was turned down, because they were afraid the wind might change its direction between the verses."

Further discussion on the successful conduct of the War was stopped by the arrival of a postal official with several stacks of incoming mail.

As sorter, Nesta at once took charge, and began dividing out the letters for distribution. Long practice had developed an almost instinctive method of selection, and certain names and addresses were recognized instantly as being already taboo. These were put aside for special examination by the authorities.

Others no less quickly were allotted to particular members of the staff whom she knew to be following

up the cases. By carrying out these arrangements it was found that valuable results were sometimes attained, owing to continuous surveillance being given by the same censor.

Once when she had been handling a small bundle of letters and postcards, a strange odour assailed her nostrils. Scent immediately rendered correspondence suspect, and previous experience had shown that such cases had to be given extra attention. The use of perfumed stationery might be entirely innocent. On the other hand——

There was always that “other hand” to be reckoned with in time of war. So she used to make a point of picking out any such envelopes and putting them aside for inspection by one of the more brilliant members of the room in place of one of the rank and file.

Nesta Marling ran her eye rapidly through these particular envelopes until she came to one whose destination was a port on the Adriatic. This was the letter she had noticed, and as she held it delicately to her nostrils she closed her eyes, the better to concentrate on one single sense.

At the result she shook her head with some misgiving. There was a pungent bitterness, as though the odour had a chemical origin, and after a moment's hesitation she slipped the envelope into a pocket of the apron which she was wearing.

The letter of Paul Morris, the enemy agent, was to undergo the investigation of the Censors' Star Performer.

CHAPTER III

THE TESTED LETTER

DISTRIBUTION of the mail was at last completed, and each censor in the room busily occupied with a first effort at reducing the allotted pile of correspondence.

Nesta Marling gave a final look round. Everything appeared to be in order, so, with a feeling of relief, she resumed her seat at one of the long tables.

"Kitten" Barton, sitting next to her, produced a cigarette-case, and opened it with an inquiring tilt. The offer was accepted with a slight smile of acknowledgment, and Nesta settled back in the chair slackening her muscles. She deserved to take things easily for a few minutes before starting an attack on her own share of the morning's post.

"Fair exchange, old thing," protested her companion. "Have you a light?"

As Nesta's fingers in search of matches slipped down into the pocket of her apron, they encountered the letter with the strange scent. At the contact she straightened up abruptly, and "Kitty" showed her surprise.

"Found a bomb?"

The question was lightly put, but the answer was made in a very different tone, as though Nesta were lost in contemplation.

"I am not sure—yet."

Her hand was withdrawn from the pocket, and the contents brought to view.

Miss Barton's eyes grew round with surprise.

"It doesn't look dangerous."

After regarding the envelope with curiosity, she sounded a slight sniff of disbelief.

"You've bought a pup this time, old thing," she remarked, putting out her hand with the intention of touching the letter. Before doing so, however, she changed her mind. After all, if Marling had absolutely nothing to go on, she wasn't the sort to make such a statement. Discretion prompted delay.

"What makes you think anything is wrong?"

Nesta assumed a grave expression, and moulded her reply to the Shakespearean style.

"There are more bombs in Heaven and earth than are dreamed of in thy philosophy."

"Kitten" still looked slightly puzzled.

"Even so, I don't see how you could possibly tell that something was wrong with the letter before it had actually been opened."

By way of answer Nesta pushed the envelope over to the other with an injunction to inhale slowly.

"See what you make of this scent."

At first the girl noticed nothing at all.

"There's none there. You've imagined it, and I don't wonder. I expect the strain of the last twelve months is beginning to tell on us all, you included. Then, on top of the rest, there are these sickening rumours. Talking of rumours——"

Nesta tried to close the flood-gates.

"Is it necessary to discuss them all over again?"

"Kitten" became somewhat annoyed at the rebuff.

An attempt was made to appease her by an opportune display of tact.

"If I'm not mistaken, there'll be something far more tangible than mere rumours by the time this affair has come to an end. That's all I meant."

"You really think so?"

"Kitten's" eyes dropped to the letter. Then her hand moved towards it in a rather tentative manner.

"Try again!" the other urged, with the insistent note of the stronger personality exercising her will on the weaker one.

"Kitten's" fingers submissively grasped the envelope and conveyed it towards her nostrils.

A long sniff, then a second one, followed by a look of surprise, mingled with admiration.

"Do you know, Marling, you're right! Absolutely. There—is—something. Very, very faint. Nothing marked. But it's there, without doubt. I wouldn't have noticed it, though, if you hadn't stuck me to it. That's a fact."

The implicit invitation to contradict her was not accepted.

"And what name would you give, Miss Barton, to what you have just observed?"

There was a certain hesitation before the answer was forthcoming.

"Not scent; I shouldn't call it that. More a sort of smell, except that there's nothing unpleasant about it. Not really unpleasant, you know. Odour! That's more the word. Yes, odour. A sort of——"

Nesta came to the rescue.

"Chemical?"

The girl brightened at the suggestion.

"That exactly describes it!"

A pause. Then Nesta began to amplify her ideas on the subject, speaking in a low tone so as not to disturb the others at the table.

"When one has to deal with such masses of letters I suppose one develops a sort of instinct about things, and my instinct recognizes this handwriting. That's not all, either. The name and address are familiar. It's not really so wonderful, when one comes to think of it. I've censored some of that man's letters before. Oh, yes, several."

The turn of the conversation intrigued "Kitten". She leaned closer, her face betraying an interest beyond the ordinary.

"Do you remember anything about them?"

Before answering, Nesta looked away. Her mind was journeying down the road of memory.

"I don't seem to associate them with any odour. That may be because a lot of cigarettes were being puffed all round me at the time. Very probably I was smoking as well. Yes, I presume that must be the explanation."

"But what about this time?" came the excited query.

"Let me see." There was a concentration of thought. "When my attention was drawn to the odour I was at the sorting-table distributing the letters. While I was doing so, I picked up half a dozen envelopes, quite haphazardly, and this chanced to be among them. There was no cigarette-smoking going on in that part of the room, and almost at once the scent, or whatever you like to call it, attracted my attention."

"What about the letters with that name and address on those previous occasions? I suppose,

though, you would hardly be likely to remember details."

There was a very definite shake of the head.

"That's where you're wrong. When anything is queer, it always seems to stick. How or why it does so, I can't explain. But it remains all right—without my doing anything about it. Consciously, that is to say."

"How frightfully interesting. Do tell me. What was it you specially noticed?"

The answer did not come at once. Thoughts had to be set in order.

"The sentences seemed innocent enough. Seemed . . . that was what was the matter with them. I had an odd impression that they were—too—innocent!"

The listener stared on hearing the phrase. There was about it a hint of finesse, to which she could never attain.

"How do you mean—too innocent?"

The star performer found it rather difficult to give an exact explanation.

"It was a kind of feeling which I had. I hardly know how else to put it. Somehow the sentences appeared rather too casual and disjointed, and not of very absorbing interest. A woman might have written a letter like that. A rather stupid woman, who wanted to pass the time, and had nothing better to do."

"I know exactly," was the enthusiastic response.

A twinkle of amusement came into Nesta's eyes.

A rather stupid woman! "or—a girl!" she expanded her definition mentally. Then she continued aloud.

"But you see, instead of a woman, it was—a man, who had written it. That made all the difference."

"Why so?"

The words induced a restless tapping of the foot. Some people could be unbelievably dense.

"Don't you see the point, Miss Barton? A man would never send a lengthy letter of that sort—all vague and—and so on. Merely that and nothing more. No, he wouldn't do it. Have you ever known it done in your experience?"

"Oh, well," a curious look came into "Kitten's" face. "That's rather different." She turned round abruptly.

"Do go on, Marling. You simply must finish, now you've begun."

Nesta thought a moment. After all, was there any reason to conceal what she had done in connection with this matter in the past?

"I kept two letters back, and stopped them going through the post for that very reason."

"Kitten" stared in astonishment.

"Because they seemed too innocent?"

Nesta could not help smiling at the surprise she had produced by her revelation.

"Exactly. For that reason and no other."

The other gave a low whistle.

"Of course, I first consulted Mrs. Johnson," was the explanation. "I told her everything, and invoked her blessing. Because—well, it was going a bit far, you know. Liberty of the individual, and all that sort of thing."

As she went on a note of disgust crept into her voice.

"The letters were typed on a perfectly dreadful

machine. It must have been a very old one. Most of the letters were worn away in parts, or broken, and out of alignment. Terrible. I should know it again in an instant."

Nesta made the remark quite thoughtlessly. Suddenly, however, she gave a start as an oddly-fantastical idea entered her mind. She dismissed it as absurd, at least she was under the impression that she had done so, but a few seconds later she found that it was still there.

With a half-shrug she accepted its presence. Very well, then, perhaps, after all, it was not such a fantastic notion.

It might turn out to be part of the same thing. If the sentences in this letter were like those others, too innocent. But this time there was another strange addition, that odour, very faint, but undoubtedly present. Something chemical. What did that suggest? Well, she could quickly put it to the test.

Crushing out the cigarette, Nesta neatly slit the envelope, and withdrew the contents with slow deliberation. It was as though she wished to prolong anticipation to its fullest span.

As she unfolded the sheets of typing-paper, she closed her eyes once more, and tried to recognize the odour, but the smell defied analysis.

However, she did notice one fact. It was distinctly stronger around the unusually wide margins, where no typing appeared. What could all that mean? One thing alone, that her suspicions were correct.

The secret message must be confined to those margins of the paper, since no attempt could have

been made at writing between the lines of the actual letter itself.

There might be some simple explanation, for the lines were very close to each other, with single spacing throughout. Possibly the writer had been afraid that the purple ink from the ribbon might become discoloured or otherwise affected if it came into contact with the acid, or whatever chemical combination he was using for hidden passages of the letter.

Each page in succession was tested in the same way, and yielded a similar result. The odour was present over the whole of the margins and altogether unnoticeable in the typed portions of the paper.

Her heart began to beat a little tattoo of excitement. Could she be on the right track?

She rose and went to the side table where the irons were kept with a light above them to aid the censors in their search for hidden messages.

Taking one of the irons from the ledge, she heated it to the required temperature, then passed it gently around the edges of the first sheet.

Several times she repeated the process, holding the paper occasionally to the light. But though she peered at it with her unaided sight, and subsequently with a magnifying-glass, nothing whatever seemed to come up.

The experiment was repeated on page after page, but always with the same negative result.

At last, with a regretful sigh, she abandoned the iron and went across to the kettle. After exposing the paper for a few moments to the steam, she returned with it to re-iron, but without success. Not the tiniest mark appeared on the document, and,

completely nonplussed, she ceased the attempt to discover secret writing.

All that remained for her to do was to make a note for the code-room, stating how she had tested for hidden messages without effect. Further, she would draw attention to the odour and to the curious fact connected with it.

There she must leave the matter. It was bitter to own defeat, but there seemed no alternative.

Nesta now turned her attention to the letter itself. She ran her eye rapidly over line after line, and saw that all the sentences had exactly the same peculiarity noticeable in the two previous communications which she had prevented from going through the post.

They were casual, disjointed, uninteresting; in a word, "unconvincing". The whole thing was too innocent!

"You were right, then?"

Kitty Barton had been watching her face with an intensity of interest.

"Absolutely. These sentences have some other meaning altogether."

"Code?"

"I'm sure of it."

"What do you think the letter is really about?"

Nesta waved the question aside with a graceful motion.

"I'm only an amateur. That is a matter for the experts upstairs."

"Kitten's" face fell.

"So all the excitement is over!"

The remark provoked an amused twitching of the lips.

"I should have said it was about to begin."

"But not for us."

There was a hint of reproof in the head-shake that replied: "Are we the sole concern?"

Nesta Marling reached over for a paper, and filled it with complete particulars of what she had observed, yet before attaching it to the suspect document, she hesitated.

Why should the code-room have all the thrill of the chase? She was a mere amateur, but could she do no more before turning the affair over to professional experts?

Why should she not make a final effort?

She bent over the first page once more, concentrating her full attention on what lay before her.

A long silence reigned, followed by a startled exclamation.

Kitty Barton looked up from the letter she was reading.

"So you've found out something after all?"

The star performer made no reply, but hope blazed in her eyes.

CHAPTER IV

FROM THE CODE-ROOM

THE telephone extension in the code-room began to sound.

"Why can't we be left alone? It is most exasperating to be disturbed when one is in the middle of tackling a tricky cipher."

After some altercation the junior member removed the receiver with a muttered imprecation.

"What is it? What is it?"

A pause for an answer. Then, as though by magic, the gruffness was exchanged for accents of honeyed sweetness.

"Certainly, Sir Hugo. I'll tell him at once. Not at all, Sir Hugo. Not in the least."

The receiver was replaced.

"The chief's already asking for you, Barwell. And it was only yesterday he returned from a week's pow-wow in Paris."

"You're for it all right, my bright lad."

Barwell's eyes wandered to the large cardboard folder on the table by his side. It had been placed there in readiness, bulging with a variety of documents, for he had a special reason for expecting a summons from Sir Hugo Farningham that morning.

"I fancy he wants me about the Morris Case."

The remark was the signal for an outbreak of chaffing. Certainly Barwell had obtained some surprising results from his recent invention of a

special chemical process for bringing out secret writing where ordinary tests failed.

Moreover, the Morris document had been by far the most startling of all his achievements in that direction. Still, all the same——

"Barwell, old top, do you know what is really the matter? You have that case on the brain."

"If I had, would it be so very surprising?"

"Possibly not—to yourself."

Crushing! Nevertheless, Barwell apparently refused to be crushed. Very tantalizing, but there it was.

Of course the telephone message had been all about the Morris affair, but the other members of the room had no intention of allowing him to get away with it without a certain amount of leg-pulling.

"The chief has recommended you for a rise!"

"What nonsense." All the same there was hope in his face.

"It's a fact. You're to be transferred to the new postal balloon section. It is being formed for the purpose of censoring messages carried by aeroplane."

"Can't you shut up all that tosh? What did Sir Hugo really say?"

But the joker was not even yet to be suppressed.

"As a matter of fact, he didn't want you at all. It was merely a message to say that Miss Marling had promised to lunch with him. So for once you'll have to go to your bun-shop alone."

Barwell glared at the speaker.

"If the chief were not waiting for me, I'd punch your head."

Rising, he took up the folder and made his way downstairs. As he passed Room D 14, he opened the door and gave a glance within.

Evidently Nesta had been anticipating something of the sort. She looked up, raised her eyebrows in an unspoken question, and saw him nod in response.

Putting aside the letter which she was in the middle of censoring, she went over to the D.A.C.'s table. A few words were exchanged, so softly that none of the others could overhear. Then, as unobtrusively as possible, she crossed to the door and made off downstairs in Barwell's footsteps.

As she entered the ante-room of Farningham's sanctum, she was informed that "Mr. Barwell was with Sir Hugo." Would she take a seat till the chief was disengaged.

Sir Hugo was a short, wiry man in his fifties, neatly dressed, precise in manner.

Briskly he indicated to Barwell a vacant place on the vast expanse of writing-table.

"These, I suppose, are the papers dealing with the suspect, Paul Morris. From the date-block I see that an appointment has been made by my secretary for twelve o'clock in connection with the case."

"Colonel Alderson is coming to see you on the subject."

Farningham looked up with some surprise.

"So it has passed from the Censors' Office into the hands of the Secret-Service? All this has happened, I suppose, during the short time I've been on the other side.

"Yes, Sir Hugo. The case first came up on the day you left for France. Afterwards events

developed rapidly. Very rapidly, indeed, I may say."

A comprehending nod.

"These affairs happen that way. There's nothing unusual about it. I gather this appointment was settled in the same hurry."

He jerked his head in the direction of the outer room, where his secretary was on duty. Then he turned his gaze on his subordinate, evidently waiting for further details of what had taken place.

"Colonel Alderson telephoned yesterday just after you left. He was anxious to speak to you about Paul Morris as soon as possible, and the secretary knew that the case had been through my hands, so called me up on the phone."

Barwell looked cautiously towards his chief before continuing.

"As it seemed to be urgent, I took the liberty of fitting in the first vacant time that we could find on the block."

Farningham pushed aside the papers with which he had been dealing when the other made his appearance from the code-room.

"What is the exact position?"

Barwell bent over the folder and extracted a typed sheet of paper.

"This is a copy of the letter as it was received in D 14."

"Let me see. That's Mrs. Johnson's room. And a very smart one, too, judging by some of their results during the last twelve months or so."

"Since——"

Barwell broke off the sentence without completing what he had intended to say.

It was one censor in particular who had been responsible for most of the coups to which reference was being made, and this one was Nesta Marling.

He did not, however, dare draw attention to that fact just then, even though he was very much in love with her, and had been asking her to lunch with him almost daily.

Never mind. He would soon find another opportunity to bring her work to the immediate notice of the chief.

"Since?"

Questioningly Farningham echoed that unfinished sentence.

"I was only thinking, sir, that—er—since D 14 has already been so successful—this Morris affair ought to make them the star room. Er—that's all, sir."

With a quick prayer to whatever gods there were, that they should pardon his departure from the realms of truth, he hurried on to the matter in hand.

"The letter was signed 'Paul Morris'. It was addressed to the head of a business firm in one of the ports in the northern Adriatic."

"To a business firm?" The point was jotted down at once. "Then why was it dealt with by D 14 instead of the trade department?"

There was a deep breath before Barwell replied.

"It was marked 'personal'. Besides, as you will see, there was no reference to trading. It purported to be a private letter."

Sir Hugo read the document through with great care.

"It certainly looks innocent enough. Can you tell me anything about the writer of the letter?"

"Nothing appeared to be known against Morris, nothing definite, at any rate. He is an export agent, according to the heading of his paper, and has been one for a number of years."

"Ah!" There was surprise in the tone.

"Oh, yes," the other continued. "Nine or ten years, at least. The censor dealing with the document made inquiries about that without loss of time."

Farningham was evidently impressed.

"That sounds very capable work. It might have been one of those faked-up War-time jobs, but if the man had carried on the agency for so long—obviously it would make the letter seem all the more above board."

"The censor was rather worried over that part."

Sir Hugo looked thoughtful. Then put another question.

"What of the people to whom the envelope was addressed?"

"The firm was not in the black-list—*then!*" Barwell waited a little before completing the remark, and there was a certain grim significance in his utterance of the last word.

A further document was brought out of the folder.

"This is the typed portion of the letter as it read after decoding."

"Ah, that is very different. Very different, indeed."

The chief's tone was emphatic.

"Well?"

Evidently there was more to come.

"When I had reached this point, Sir Hugo, somehow I wasn't altogether satisfied. There was the question of the odour along the margins. Attention had been directed to that by the postal-room."

At this Farningham turned his alert gaze on the other.

"So they had noticed that, too, had they?"

A rather diffident smile in response. Was it possible that the young man from the code-room could be blushing? No doubt it was only some quaint prank of the light.

"Oh, yes. She—they—that is—yes, sir."

The slight confusion brought a furtive smile of sympathy.

In spite of breathing the rarified atmosphere of high officialdom, even a Great Panjandrum has his moments. Occasionally he becomes aware that there still remain certain points in which there is a resemblance between "Man" and "man".

"Cap" man and "rom" man, as the printer might designate them. The Man of Capital and the man of commoner type, from the "roman" font.

"The usual methods of testing secret writing had been tried in the postal room, Sir Hugo, but entirely without success. However, some chemical experiments had been conducted along slightly different lines in connection with the code-room. As a consequence, this new process had been evolved. Only a month or two previously. It was tried on the Morris letter—with this result."

Farningham stared in amazement at the lengthy message placed before him, with the astounding collection of facts, which it contained.

"Do you mean to tell me, all that was written in the margins of the letter?"

"Every word, sir. Of course the script was quite unusually small."

"Even then!"

An expressive gesture followed.

"You must realize, sir, that the margins were exceptionally large. Another point to arouse suspicion."

Sir Hugo screwed up his eyes and studied the document once again. Then shook his head with slow astonishment.

"I cannot understand how the man could have obtained so much valuable information." A momentary hesitation, and he continued: "I'm afraid I can't go into details. But you can take it from me that at this particular stage of the War, such facts as these are more than valuable. They are vital. It is impossible to foresee what the result would have been, if that letter had gone through—" he glanced at the address on the envelope with a wry face, "To the Adriatic and from there," his shoulders moved expressively, "to its ultimate destination."

"Even with my slight knowledge, sir, it looked rather like that. In the ordinary way, I should have brought the Morris Case direct to your notice, but your secretary said you had been called over to France and were not expected back for several days."

"Quite. So I suppose you went to my second in command?"

"Yes, Sir Hugo. I fully explained the circumstances and asked his formal permission to get into

touch at once with Colonel Alderson. I knew, of course, that he had been consulted on previous occasions and in similar situations."

"What happened at the interview?"

"There seemed no doubt what was to be done. The Intelligence people took the case out of our hands."

"And since then——?"

The chief had a way of starting off a sentence and afterwards leaving it to reach its objective as best it could.

"For a week I heard nothing," was the answer. "Then last night there came the Colonel's telephone message."

"It will be interesting to learn what has been taking place during these last days."

"Yes, sir."

In Barwell's voice there was a touch of envy that appealed to the Great Panjandrum.

"When my interview is over with the Colonel, if it is possible for me to stretch a point—you may depend on my doing so."

"Your confidence will not be abused, sir."

"I'm sure of that," was the smiling reply.

It was this essential humanity, this power of sympathy with the natural feelings of his subordinates, which endeared Farningham to the members of his staff.

He glanced at his watch. There still lacked some ten minutes to the time settled for the appointment with the expert in counter-espionage.

"Who was responsible for the original discovery?"

"Censor 260. Miss Nesta Marling."

Puzzled little lines appeared in the chief's forehead.

"Somehow the name seems familiar, although I can't quite place it in my mind."

Barwell was at once alert to do his lady some service.

"This is by no means the first time Miss Marling has sent important documents to the code-room."

"I see. Well? Go on."

"The Morris letter was brought by her to the notice of the D.A.C. in the usual way, held up and passed on to our department. The slip, which accompanied the document, was filled in very carefully indeed. Attention was called to the various points that had aroused suspicion."

"It was a very smart piece of work on the part of Miss Marling. There's no question about that. And you say it is by no means the first occasion?"

"Much the same thing has happened at least six or seven times before to my own personal knowledge. Nothing so sensational as the Morris Case, but—most important. Miss Marling only completed her first year a few months ago, which makes her record all the more—more——"

Having come as far as that, Barwell was suddenly seized with stage fright. He hesitated and was lost. Or would have been but for the tactful aid of the Great Panjandrum.

"Remarkable?"

As he supplied the missing link, his eyes twinkled humorously.

"I'll tell her what you have said, sir," was the grateful answer.

"Thank you, Barwell. I should be very glad indeed if you would do so."

The kindness induced an eager query.

"Would you care to see the document actually sent by Paul Morris?"

"If so, I suppose Censor 260 is waiting with it in the ante-room. By all means ask her to bring in the letter."

Farningham permitted a tinge of condescension to colour his answer. A gentle reminder of his position.

Should he have risen superior to the feeling of superiority? Possibly so. And yet——

Might there not be moments, even, when an archangel thanked Heaven he was not as other angels?

CHAPTER V

INCOGNITA

WITH the documents concerning Paul Morris spread out before him on the writing-table, Sir Hugo Farningham followed with the utmost attention everything pointed out to him.

At last Nesta Marling reached the end of her explanation.

"So the letter went up to the code-room for further investigation and, of course, it was there that the really important part of the work began, thanks to the wonderful new chemical process discovered by Mr. Barwell for bringing out secret writing."

"Quite so, Miss Marling." There was an ironical twist in the inflection of the first two words. "I won't trouble you for your views on the merits of the various members of my staff."

He shot a quizzing glance at her before proceeding.

"As a matter of fact, I've already been favoured with Mr. Barwell's opinion as to the efficiency of one censor in particular."

A sudden shyness swept over the girl, and she became aware that her cheeks were flushing.

It was really most absurd for such a thing to happen. More like a Jane Austen heroine than a woman worker in the fourth year of the Great War.

She bit her lip from annoyance, then sensed that his eyes were on hers. A worried line appeared in

her forehead, as she looked up at last, only to find him pleasantly smiling.

"That's all right, my dear. You mustn't mind my fun. I've a daughter of my own."

"You mean Ilma," she blurted out, almost before she realized what she was doing.

Yet after all there could be no harm. The official nature of the interview was apparently relaxed. She was being treated as a fellow human-being instead of a business automaton. That being so, why should she conceal the true position any longer?

"Ilma?" He echoed the name in slight astonishment.

"Then you—? Have—? Do we—?" At each unfinished query he was conscious of increasing embarrassment. Had he met the girl in a mutual social circle on some previous occasion? Was that why he had seemed to recognize her name, on hearing it mentioned by Barwell, in connection with the Morris Case?

"Am I to answer all those abbreviated questions at once, Sir Hugo?"

"Did we——?"

"As a matter of fact we did; but in somewhat different circumstances."

"Then that explains—I was almost sure——"

"It is not very surprising that you should have failed to recognize me. On the last occasion when we met—in private life——" her hand instinctively went to her head as she called attention to the difference in *coiffeur*.

"My hair was down."

She gave a charming smile, then continued her

explanation. "Your daughter, Ilma, and I were at school together at West Dene."

"So that was it." Some part of his mind, however, remained unsatisfied. "But surely there has been some closer connection." Half-assertion, half-question, to which his eyes sought an answer from her face.

"You're quite right, Sir Hugo. Several times I have had the privilege of being your guest at dinner. Lady Farningham used to be most kind in her invitations during the holidays."

Evidently her words struck a chord of remembrance which aroused his imagination. At once he began to paint the picture of the past in more vivid colours, until in the end everything stood out clearly.

"Now it has all come back to me. You're the daughter of Lord Effington." He nodded briskly. "Of course, that accounts for your command of languages, rather off the beaten track as far as we English are concerned. Your father held a number of important diplomatic posts in the Balkan States before the War."

"In point of fact, Sir Hugo, I was born out there; and never came to England until I had reached my teens. So whatever facility I may have in the way of languages is merely the result of upbringing. I owe everything to my nurses."

"Oh, come," he expostulated. "Aren't you rather overstating the case? By the way, Lady Nesta, why are you calling yourself—'Miss' Marling?"

"*Autre temps, autres mœurs*," she quoted. Then gave a suspicion of a shrug born of the Gallicism. "After all, so far as routine is concerned, we censors

are only so many ciphers. 'Lady 260' would sound somewhat out of place in these surroundings."

An understanding glance passed between them. "Probably you are right, Lady Nesta."

The raising of her eyebrows conveyed the hint of delicate reproach. Instinctively he corrected himself.

"Miss Marling."

The return to the more formal atmosphere brought them to the actual subject of the interview.

"I gather that the stages of your progress in the suspect letter were these."

Giving a brief *résumé*, he quickly reached his concluding observations.

"Finally you noticed that the spacing between certain words was unusual in relation to the rest. The full stop at the end of the second sentence was in a wrong position. More like the top dot of a colon. The two commas preceding this were far too high. Compared with those in the remainder of the document. It was almost as though the paper had deliberately been shifted downwards in the machine, to produce that identical effect for some special purpose. Have I the various details correct in my mind?"

"Everything is absolutely accurate, Sir Hugo."

Farningham rose, with a courteous indication that the interview was at an end.

"I fear things are looking serious. From now on there must be no discussion of the Morris Case among the staff. Perhaps you would request the head of the room to come and see me during the afternoon."

The crisp precision of his official manner was

exchanged once more for a softer, less impersonal tone.

"And now I have to thank you for your valuable assistance in the preliminary stages of this case."

Nesta was swift to disclaim any cause for praise.

"I was simply doing my work, Sir Hugo," her eyes twinkled as she went on, "like the rest of the staff. But please don't take that as an expression of my views as to their merit."

He gave a short laugh of appreciation as between social equals. Then his voice took on a note of regret.

"If only I might be sure everyone else could be relied upon to 'do their job' with equal proficiency."

It was indeed a consummation devoutly to be wished. However, it was too much to expect an entire staff to be turned into paragons.

He must be thankful for such brilliance as the Censor's Office possessed.

The girl prepared to make her departure with the slight inclination of the head suitable to her position as a government employée leaving the presence of a Lord High Everything Else.

Before she could carry out the prescribed ritual, Sir Hugo cast off officialdom. Coming forward with an entirely ungovernmental smile he grasped her warmly by the hand.

"Ilma will be most interested to hear of our meeting. She has taken up work as a V.A.D. and is helping my married sister in Devonshire. Their home has been given over to the recuperation of wounded officers."

"Of course, Westercombe must be an ideal spot

for anything of that sort," she answered enthusiastically. "With its gorgeous lawns and great rambling park."

The Countess of Blaircombe certainly owned one of the show spots in the West Country.

"Then you know the place, Lady—Miss—Marling?" He corrected himself with an amused slant of the mouth.

"At one time I was very well acquainted with Westercombe. An uncle of mine had the adjoining estate in the old days before——"

A little gesture of hopelessness. Already the thought of those times before the War seemed like contemplating some far off period—a mode of life irrevocably dead; never to know resurrection.

With quick instinct Farningham answered her unspoken words.

"I fear you're right. They'll never come back."

Then he returned to the subject of his daughter.

"As it happens, Ilma is due in town in a few days. I'm sure she would be delighted to see you again. May I ask her to ring you up and fix something? Perhaps you would dine with us, or spend a Sunday?"

"Thank you, Sir Hugo. That would be lovely."

"Will you please remember me to Lord Effington?"

"In return will you be so kind as to forget during business hours that I am his daughter? When I came to the Censor's Office in the first place, it was as 'Miss Marling'. So long as I continue to work here, I prefer that the other members of the staff should—well, should look on me as—'no lady'!" Her face rippled with merriment as she spoke.

"As you wish."

He touched the bell.

"Then may I rely on you to tell no one?" For some reason she was anxious to stress the point.

Acquiescing he walked with her towards the door. As they approached, it opened and Barwell entered.

"*No one*. Please!" Nesta emphasized in a significant undertone.

Farningham gave her a glance of sympathetic comprehension. Then tactfully returned to his writing-table. As he did so Barwell's whispered question reached his ears, followed by the girl's soft answer.

"Lunch?"

"Very well."

The door closed behind her.

"Colonel Alderson has arrived, Sir Hugo."

A moment later the Secret-Service man was ushered into the room.

CHAPTER VI

SECRET-SERVICE

"ARE you ready for me, Sir Hugo?"

While Colonel Alderson was putting the question, his eyes drifted round the room until eventually they came to rest on reaching the writing-table, where lay the bulging folder devoted to the Morris Case.

"I see you are fully prepared."

"I think so," Farningham acquiesced. "Probably you would prefer to remain undisturbed?"

"In some ways it is quite essential," was the prompt response.

The Great Panjandrum of the Censor's Office at once removed the receiver of the telephone connecting him with the exchange on the ground floor of the building.

The ear-clamped girl, who took the call, 'jumped to it', in a way that would have rejoiced the heart of even the most case-hardened sergeant-major.

"For some time I shall be engaged. Put no one through till I let you know to the contrary."

Replacing the receiver, he turned to Barwell.

"You had better stand by in the ante-room in case Colonel Alderson should require you."

"Very good, Sir Hugo."

"Let them know in the code-room, that they are not to expect you for the present."

Barwell was about to withdraw, when Alderson detained him.

"One moment." The Colonel turned to Farningham. "There is someone due to meet me here in a few minutes in connection with this Morris affair."

"Would you like him to be sent up as soon as he arrives?"

There was a slight hesitation, while the other made up his mind as to the best arrangement.

"When I'm ready, I'll ring the bell—twice—if I may."

A nod of dismissal, and Barwell retired. The two men were left alone.

"I gather your investigations have been successful."

"Up to a point, Sir Hugo. And an uncommonly interesting point, too, I promise you."

"I can quite believe that," was the agreement. Farningham then pulled towards him the folder containing the documents and particulars of the case. Withdrawing the original letter, he held it up with a feeling not far removed from amazement.

"This Morris letter is one of the stiffest propositions I have ever come across since taking up my present appointment."

"Same here," Alderson answered. "While I've been engaged in this sport of counter-espionage, one way and another I've had some fairly exciting chases. Unless I'm very much mistaken, though, Morris is going to show a clean pair of heels to the rest of the field. He'll fairly romp home the winner of the Home Counties Spy Stakes."

"You know, it astounds me that one man could have collected so much secret information here, there and everywhere."

The Secret-Service man frowned.

"A very apt description."

Sir Hugo's mind went back to all the strangely unreal realities that had come to his notice in the past.

"One knew the Central Powers had established an elaborate spy organization in England before the War, but this communication of Paul Morris is concerned with a mass of confidential details coming from some other source altogether. They don't affect Germany at all, not directly, at any rate. All these facts have to do with Italy, Greece, Turkey, Palestine, and the Balkans. "

"Especially—the—last!"

The Colonel spoke these three words slowly with marked intensity.

"It came to me as quite a bolt from the blue," Sir Hugo remarked in a rather aggrieved tone.

"It ought not to have done so. Have you forgotten the theory propounded by me in this very room only a few months ago?"

The cold severity of Farningham's face melted into a smile.

"What was that delicious phrase of yours, again?"

"The Balkan Spider."

Sir Hugo chuckled.

"Those were the very words. I can remember them now, quite distinctly. The—Balkan—Spider."

Suddenly his face grew serious again, as his mind reverted to something mentioned a few moments previously.

Alderson read his thoughts as though they were an open book.

"Do you happen to recollect, Sir Hugo, how I completed the sentence that day?"

In response to a negative head-shake, he repeated the original phrase.

"'The Spider—whose web stretched all over England'. What else is in the letter you are holding at this very moment?"

The listener's eyes widened considerably.

"But all along it sounded so utterly incredible."

"Very possibly. Instead——"

There was no need for the Secret-Service man to emphasize his meaning in words. Besides, he thoroughly understood the effect of well-chosen silence.

At last he leaned forward, and put a question in a low voice.

"What would you say if I told you I was in a position to produce the Balkan Spider for your inspection?"

At these words Sir Hugo stared in bewilderment.

"When?"

"Now."

Alderson placed his fingers on the bell and rang twice. The pre-arranged signal.

Barwell appeared at the door.

The Secret-Service man made a decisive gesture.

"Tell Inspector Wilson I am ready."

CHAPTER VII

THE BALKAN SPIDER

WHEN the Inspector entered the chief's room he was accompanied by another man.

"This is Paul Morris," Alderson explained to Farningham in an undertone.

"But you don't mean to tell me that this man is actually the Balkan Spider you were talking about?"

"The very same. I thought you had already guessed."

The whispered conversation came to an end, and for a time nothing further was said. The Inspector had been about to put some question, but remained silent in response to a warning frown from the Colonel.

Morris became increasingly restless at the protracted pause, and glowered annoyance. At last he was provoked to speech.

"You can't treat a British subject in this way." His voice was half-defiant, half-aggrieved.

A slight rounding of Alderson's face indicated that he felt a certain satisfaction. Had it been his aim to force Morris into making the first move in the game that was about to be played? Almost it seemed so.

"I don't think you can complain of your treatment—considering!" he retorted in a bantering manner.

"Considering—what?"

"Everything!" A challenging glance, then: "Are you satisfied with the answer—Mr. Paul Morris?"

The biting sarcasm of the last words goaded the man into a display of anger. In the heat of the moment he took a second false step, from which cooler judgment would have restrained him.

"Why do you speak my name in such a tone? Have you any fault to find with it?"

Alderson half-closed his lids and peered at the other through his eyelashes. In his imagination he saw the man behind bars, a poetic fancy which before long was likely to have a material counterpart.

"There is only one fault I have to find with your name. It is not your real one."

"I assure you it is."

"Should I rather say: 'Not your original one'?"

"So they have come as far as that," thought Morris, with lips tightened by annoyance. He must assume a disarming simplicity.

"Why, of course, it is not my original one. You thought that suspicious? How very odd. Why, my dear sir, my name was altered long ago—many years before the War. From your manner that evidently astonishes you."

He could see nothing of the sort. Nevertheless, it suited him to make a pretence of doing so.

"You seem to be suggesting that by such an act I was doing something shameful," he continued. "What a strange point of view. Surely not a vice, but a virtue on my part, to have such an admiration for your wonderful countrymen that I was anxious to become one of them in name"—he assumed a

frankness of manner—"and in nationality as well. Perhaps you did not know that I had become an Englishman by naturalization? I can assure you it is the truth. Was that something shocking in your eyes? You are proud to have been born British. How much more proud am I to have become British!"

Morris began to congratulate himself on carrying off the situation extremely well.

And what of his listeners? They could not help admiring the fellow's sang-froid, his histrionic talent.

One thing was wanting to make him completely convincing. How much more effective it would have been if their minds, like some slate, could have been wiped clean of all that damning written knowledge about him.

"I assure you, gentlemen," he continued, "you will find everything absolutely correct. My name was altered by deed poll, according to the provisions of the statute. As for my position as a British subject—this is no less clear. My naturalization papers are in perfect order."

There was a faint note of challenge in his voice.

Alderson's manner became extremely genial as he answered.

"Believe me, Mr. Morris, we have no doubts whatever on that point."

The assurance had come too quickly to be entirely comfortable. Morris had an unpleasant feeling, which he tried to disguise under a certain blatancy of manner.

"Very well, then. Was I not justified in complaining of my treatment?"

Such a question provoked an impatient gesture from the Secret-Service man.

"You may as well know that all this gets you nowhere. It merely wastes a good deal of other people's time, which happens to be rather valuable. Wouldn't it be better to drop the bluff?"

At the implication Morris shook his head from side to side in an assumption of bewilderment.

"I don't understand your meaning in the least."

Alderson's method changed to a somewhat threatening firmness. "I'll try to make things plainer. Let me ask you a few questions. What is your occupation in this country—of your adoption?"

"Export agent," came the pat response.

"Rather a wide term to use. Does it imply export to the world in general?"

"To Southern Europe, the Middle and Eastern portion only; the shore of the Adriatic, Greece—and so on."

"Do your present activities include—Bulgaria?"

"An enemy country? I will be frank with you. Hostilities have made havoc with my trade."

"In fact, hardly anything remains. Is that the position?"

"You are quite right."

Cold contempt came into Alderson's face as he jerked out his accusation. "Barely sufficient even for the purposes of camouflage! Eh?"

Morris drew himself up, with a sense of offended dignity.

"I don't know what you mean by that remark." Greatly daring, he put out a feeler, so as to learn something more tangible.

"Perhaps you would be so good as to tell me why

I have been detained in this way without the slightest warning?"

At these words Inspector Wilson opened his eyes wider. In a long experience he had rarely known anyone to display such a "nerve" in circumstances so completely damning.

Alderson watched the little comedy with considerable amusement. Next he gave Morris one of the surprises of his life.

"Our action was taken in order to prevent you from completing arrangements to clear out of England—under a false passport."

Still there was a continuation of the man's attempt. He was even yet hoping against hope.

"You seem to be making a most outrageous error."

Before replying, the Colonel slipped a hand to the inner pocket of his jacket, and withdrew a passport, which he unfolded with slow deliberation for the other's inspection.

"That is not mine."

A slight raising of the shoulders followed the retort.

"Not your name, granted. Still, your passport all right."

"You're entirely mistaken. I've never set eyes on it before."

"If the passport was not yours, why were you treasuring it so carefully in the secret drawer of the writing-table—where you kept various other valuables?"

Morris's fingers twitched nervously. They must have found the code-book. Now he was indeed lost—and not he alone.

"Am I to understand you have searched my private premises without a warrant?"

His voice was high-pitched, and Alderson's answer flashed back at once.

"There was ample warrant for the search in the letter which you posted about ten days ago with a foreign address"—he smiled grimly—"somewhere in the Adriatic."

So saying, he strode over to Farningham's writing-table, and took up the folder from the code-room, removing the document held up in transit by Nesta Marling.

"No doubt you imagined that by this time your communication would have reached its final destination . . . somewhere vastly different to the place mentioned on the envelope. As you see, such is not the case."

In spite of these words, Morris did not guess the full extent of the disaster which had fallen on him.

"But," he expostulated, "this was only a personal letter to a member of a well-known foreign firm."

"Believe me, the firm will be much better known before we have finished with them. As for the 'personal letter'—that was the phrase you used, I think—would you like to hear how it read after being decoded?"

When Morris heard this, he realized any ground for assurance was disintegrating beneath his feet.

"I assure you there has been some terrible mistake."

Even as he made his protest there was a lack of conviction in his tone.

Alderson came nearer, holding the letter in his hand with apparent carelessness.

"You might prefer me to read you extracts from the message penned in the margins in invisible writing. The words came up beautifully."

At the taunt Morris abandoned discretion, and attempted to snatch the fatal paper. It was withdrawn from his reach with swift alertness.

A trap!

That was all it had been. He realized the fact at last. Seeing the drama being played before him, Sir Hugo leaned forward at his table with an interest keyed to the highest pitch.

"Colonel Alderson! If this man had no idea of the contents, why should he be so anxious to recover the document?"

"The position could hardly be clearer," the Secret-Service man agreed. "By his action, Morris has fully acknowledged his personal guilt. Any mistake has been quite impossible. That was one of the reasons why I wished the interview to take place in your presence."

He again directed his attention to the spy.

"It may save time in the end if I tell you that, from the moment this letter of yours was brought to my notice, your entire correspondence has been under surveillance." Assuming the bantering manner, he went on. "Do you realize this typing-machine of yours is becoming quite an old friend? I know all its defects intimately. Doubtless your extensive circle of correspondents are in the same fortunate position. It forms a link between us which I greatly appreciate. When I visited your rooms yesterday I was glad to see the machine in its usual place."

Morris understood the words contained some hidden significance, disturbing, intangible. He could not grasp it, but he was certain something lay beneath it. Neither was that all. Directly he met those eyes fixed on him with a piercing intentness, he noticed that they bore a close resemblance to his own. The likeness, indeed, was almost uncanny.

For some seconds he continued to gaze into them, and while so doing, he became aware of some secret purpose, some threat. He caught his breath. Could it be? No. Impossible. He tried to thrust the thought from his mind—in vain.

In some way the chance resemblance between Alderson's eyes and his own was to be utilized to the advantage of his adversary. Morris was positive of the fact. Only the means of accomplishment still eluded him.

While searching in the fog of uncertainty, he became aware of the Colonel's voice.

"There is no need to take up any more of your valuable time, Sir Hugo. Inspector Wilson, place that man under arrest at once as a spy, and take him to my room."

Morris breathed hard as the handcuffs closed about his wrists, and once more Farningham and Alderson were alone.

A short silence ensued while each pondered on the events which had taken place during the last quarter of an hour.

At length Sir Hugo put a question which had puzzled him throughout the latter part of the interview.

"That's not the finish of the affair, I can see it

from your manner. Exactly what do you propose to do now?"

The spy-hunter's face became illuminated by the joy of anticipation.

"I am going to play a game of Diamond Cut Diamond."

CHAPTER VIII

MISSING

Two hours after Paul Morris's interview at the Censor's, his sitting-room in Jermyn Street was being "gone over" by the housekeeper in the slightly perfunctory manner almost inseparable from bachelordom.

The telephone gave forth a jingling as Mrs. Blake shifted it during the process of alleged cleaning, and there was something almost companionable in the metallic sound. Truth to tell, since the mysterious departure of Mr. Morris, the quietude of 315 Jermyn Street had been "that depressing. I give you *my* word." It fair gave her the hump. Straight it did.

Only that morning she had assured her next-door neighbour of the fact.

With a grunt of disgust, she transferred her attention to the furniture, and as she turned to the rest of the room, she found herself at last face to face with the writing-table. In a dazed sort of way she began staring at it.

A growing mound of correspondence, still unopened, was piled up at the side of the typewriter, awaiting its owner's return to his chambers. Not merely letters lay there; included in the pile was a telegram delivered at the house on the previous day. Ought they to have accepted it, without saying anything?

What other course was possible?

Re-direct it? They had no idea of their master's whereabouts.

Return it to the telegraph-boy, offering "gone away" as the explanation? Would that have been correct? He had not gone away. He was away; that was all. He would be returning. Of course he would. Sooner or later.

But how soon? How much later? Time was getting on. Why didn't Morris write?

The inner door of the sitting-room was ajar, and through it she heard the rat-tat of the postman. Her face cleared at once. Perhaps there was a card telling them something.

Her husband kicked back the outer door behind him as he pushed open the padded one and made his way into the sitting-room.

"Nothing." Before she had a chance to put the question in her mind, he had growled the answer.

"Damn that outer door. A lot of foolery. That's what it is. Tom-foolery, I call it."

He had been surly and irritable ever since his "call-up" notice had arrived. When one was growing into middle-age, there was something singularly distasteful in the thought of rooting up a settled mode of existence and making drastic changes. And this time the alteration was to be revolutionary indeed.

Faute de mieux, then, he vented his annoyance on the doors.

"Why couldn't the guv'nor content himself with only one of 'em, like ordinary folk?"

The grumble merely provoked his wife to gibing mirth.

"Some folks' ears are that long, three doors wouldn't be enough to stop 'em."

But Blake was quite capable of protecting himself from the shafts of her humour.

"Some folks' tongues are that long, they'll land 'em a thick ear one of these days."

The housekeeper wasted no time in coming to the real point of the argument.

"Thick ear or no thick ear, Morris pays us well enough, don't he? If he wants four doors, he can have 'em, can't he?"

With that she gave him a look of conscious superiority, standing with arms akimbo, and hands resting on a comfortable, cushiony curve that once had been a waist-line.

"Don't tell me you're starting to complain. Not with all he gives you. * And all you gives yourself."

There had been an ominous pause, before she added this feminine *post dict*, containing the gist of the matter. It caught him on the raw.

"Stow it, my gal. You won't have me with you long."

Blake ran his eyes slowly over the letters in his hand before adding them to the pile on the table.

"Just as well Mr. Morris showed us where he kept the spare key to his letter-box, in case of accidents. Where's he got to these four days?"

At the rhetorical question, to which no answer was as yet possible, Mrs. Blake wrinkled up her nose in doubt.

"Don't know what to make of him, going off that way—quite casual—like."

The last word was added more from inherent verbosity than grammatical necessity.

"Never have thought it of him," she went on. "Never. 'Dinner at seving sharp, Mrs. Blake'. That's what he said. Quite ordinary. Then for him not to turn up to eat it. Not to let us know, nor nothing. And all the food wasted."

"Would have been," Blake murmured with a reminiscent smack of the lips.

"Some lodgers are rum birds, and no mistake," his wife observed in philosophic mood. "Always flying off somewhere. Queer at the best of times."

Her husband stared out of the window with an injured expression, while he made his next comment.

"And these ain't the best of times. No one can say there are! What with another air-raid on Monday. Berlast them full moons. That's what I say. Berlast 'em."

Something seemed to strike him.

"The very day that Morris disappeared. That's odd. Never thought of it before."

Mrs. Blake spoke again, her tone casually contemplative.

"Foreign gents is always queer. Mr. natooralized Morris and the rest of 'em."

Blake turned towards her with a horrified look.

"Don't you go calling Morris foreign, Angela, for —reven's sake. He's English, same as us. Don't you forget it, or he'll 'ave the lor on you. Ay, my gal, yer can't be too partic'lar these days."

Her nose tilted heavenwards in disgust.

"Same as hus, I don't think."

"He's got his papers an' all," was the heavy contradiction in the most impressive manner of which Blake was capable.

"He showed 'em to me himself, when he became a tenant of the two floors. You've seen 'em, same as me. You know you 'ave."

"Oh, them? Yes!"

His wife's acquiescence had about it a somewhat grudging flavour.

"Very well, then! So just watch out what I'm going to tell you. It's like this, as you may say. If people come nosing around, don't let on that you know nothing. He may be mixed up in some sort of Government business. You can't never tell, not these days. All you're to do's to sit tight, my gal, and mum's the word."

He turned towards the window once more, with a view to avoiding further discussion. Next moment he drew back sharply, and began peering through the side curtains. His action aroused her curiosity.

"What's up now, Mr. Know-All?"

He crossed the room on tiptoe, answering her in a hoarse whisper.

"There's a bloke watching the 'ouse."

"Suppose there is?" came the caustic comment.

"He can't hear you from the outside, can he? There's no call to go play-acting all over the place like that. As a matter of fact——"

The housekeeper repeated her words with immense solemnity.

"As a matter of fact—I've noticed the plain-clothes big-boots brigade hanging around a good deal these last few days. Wot for, eh?"

"You've said it," he replied in a voice no less suspicious. "S'pose they've found out something."

"Now then, long ears."

Her chaff aroused a prompt protest.

"Shut it! I haven't heard nothing, if that's what you're hinting. They might have. That's all I meant. S'pose they have! And s'pose he's found out that they have. And s'pose he don't come back—because—he—daren't?"

He watched her from the shelter of his overhanging brows, to see how she took it. Satisfied with the impression made, he elaborated his theory.

"A man don't watch a place for nothing, specially these days. An' don't forget it, my gal."

The telephone began to ring, and they stared at the instrument with evident nervousness. The whirring continued while each waited for the other to answer.

"Go on. It won't bite you. Even if it is the big-boot brigade, you've done nothing, 'ave yer? Well, then."

Suddenly an insistent ringing of the front-door bell reached them.

"That settles it, anyhow," the manservant muttered, as he left the room.

The housekeeper raised the receiver and addressed the telephone quite timidly.

"'Ello? 'El-low? Who's speaking? Who's——"

Her face changed as she listened with the ear-phone pressed tightly against her head.

"You, Mr. Morris? Well, I never did!"

Another deep intake of breath—a habit of hers at moments of unexpected emotion.

"To think that I didn't recognize yer voice straight off, like I generally does. A cold? Oh, I see, sir. Yes, sir. I s'pose it do make a difference. It must do. But wot has 'appened to you all this time? And why didn't you give us your address?"

S'as we could send on them letters. There's a telegram, too, sir."

A longer pause, then:

"No, not yet, sir. No one's been asking for you to-day. What's that, sir? You're expecting someone? The front bell did just ring. If you'll wait I'll find out."

She heard the door open.

"Here is Blake, sir. Perhaps he has a message."

She thrust her chin firmly into the transmitter, so that no sound could pass along the wire.

"It's Morris. Would you believe it? His very self. But that perlite! For him! Well!"

Words failed her to describe the change that had come over her master's vocabulary.

"Foreign gent downstairs," Blake rasped, "with a crack-jaw name. Says he wired. Wants to see the guv'nor most partic'lar. Lady friend with him, too. Another foreigner, by the looks."

The wife delivered the message over the phone, jerking her head to detain her husband for his instructions.

"They're to be brought upstairs? I'm to say you're on your way? Very good, sir."

The manservant nodded.

"So that's that, my gal. I was beginning to think— But I was wrong."

As he was going out of the room she called him back in a slightly worried tone.

"Morris must have had an awful cold or something. Never so much as recognized his voice, until he told me who he was."

CHAPTER IX

THE COMING OF VARASKI

THERE was something furtive in the way Varaski entered the sitting-room.

As soon as he had done so, he began peering at the housekeeper through half-closed eyes. Then gradually he passed the entire room under his inspection, taking in each detail as it met his gaze.

Nothing very special attracted his notice until he observed the writing-table with its pile of unopened letters. So that was why the occupier of the rooms was not there to receive him. Maurice Porloff, or "Paul Morris" as he must be called, was away from home.

A sinister smile of recognition came into Varaski's face as he noted the typewriter standing on the table by the window. This, no doubt, was the identical machine with whose peculiarities he was so well acquainted.

There was something about the foreigner which was slightly repellent to the housekeeper. At his entry she had drawn away instinctively, shrinking back as at the approach of some evil thing. Yet all the while she had been unaware of making any movement.

After a minute or so she became accustomed to his presence, and reminded herself sharply that she had a message to deliver. As was her custom with foreigners, she addressed him in a loud voice,

apparently with the idea that he would be quite unable to understand her language if she spoke with no more than the normal amount of energy. In her belief, volume of tone had some magical property capable of removing all obstacles caused by lack of vocabulary.

"I've told him you are here, sir." The housekeeper indicated the telephone with her head.

On first hearing her speak, he stared in quick surprise, wondering if she supposed him to be deaf?

He answered very softly, hoping to bring her to realization of the true facts before he suffered unduly from ear-shock.

"So you have tell Mr. Morris that I have arrive, huh?"

The strained expression faded from her face, giving way to a look of relief. He had a considerable alien accent, there was no doubt of that. Evidently, however, he was sufficiently at home in England to enter on a conversation that would be comprehensible, if not entirely faultless.

Her husband's description of the man's name as "crack-jaw" she allowed to remain a secret thought, and in so doing felt immensely tactful.

In point of fact, Varaski had not given his name at all. He had been far too shrewd to do this, but had merely put a suitable question in his own native Bulgarian to ascertain, without loss of time, whether Morris's man had any knowledge of that language.

From the look on Blake's face the chance seemed sufficiently remote, but Varaski had preferred to make certain.

Hearing the housekeeper's remark, he made no comment. Apparently he was prepared for the

conversation to die at the very moment of its birth.

Not so Mrs. Blake. To her, at any rate, speech was a veritable staff of life. She hungered for it with a feeling of physical discomfort amounting almost to pain.

"I don't remember seeing you before, sir."

He explained that this was his first visit to England. Then he went out on the landing and called down over the balusters to his companion, who was standing motionless in the hall below.

"You can come up, Mademoiselle."

Marie Krajova ascended to the first floor with seeming reluctance, and was ushered into the sitting-room.

She was a beautiful Roumanian, intellectual in face, magnetic in personality, elegant in manner. One, in fact, who had received plentifully the gifts of the gods.

"Then Morris is not here?" When she spoke there was not a trace of accent, for she was a perfect linguist.

He gave a careless shrug and strolled over to the window, while she in turn took in the room with her sweeping glance. As she did so, a certain fastidious disapproval showed itself.

The housekeeper, as woman to woman, was apologetic.

"You must hexcuse the room being a bit untidy, miss."

The last word was preceded by a glance at the ring finger of the left hand. It did not strike her to look at the other, since variations in the custom of wearing a wedding-ring had not come within her

sphere of knowledge. All the same she was correct in her surmise; Marie Krajova was unmarried.

"It was Mr. Morris being away—and all," Mrs. Blake explained in her usual vague fashion.

The new-comer appeared rather puzzled by the idiom.

"And all—what?" she queried, in perfectly good faith.

"For the minute I thought she was pulling my leg, straight I did," the housekeeper subsequently confided to her husband when recounting the episode.

At the time, however, she gave no hint of her feelings, beyond looking "a bit old-fashioned", as Blake would have described it.

The gesture by which she answered was just a vague wave of the hand and forearm. It might have been classed "descriptive", save for its failure to give any very definite indication of what it was intended to describe.

"All—everything. As you might say."

The second idiom was not an unhappy thought. It prevented the discussion being further pursued along that line. But in any case Marie had no intention of carrying on her conversation. Instead, she gave a shiver. Was it her body that was chilled? Or her soul?

The housekeeper took the more material view. As she looked at the girl who was to all appearances the spoiled child of fortune, how could she guess the fearful truth of that journey to England?

"If you're cold, miss, I'll set a match to the fire."

Reaching down, she coaxed a flame, and waited until the coal was well alight.

"There you are, miss. That will soon hot up the room."

At the expression a faint suggestion of amusement flickered in Marie's eyes. Her own wording showed a touching devotion to the rules of grammar. So much was this the case that her manipulation of the English language was almost too exact to sound natural. What was with her the attainment of lingual purity would have amounted to affectation in someone British born and bred.

By reason of this exactness of knowledge she derived considerable fun from Mrs. Blake's variations. Quickly recapturing her seriousness, she made a rather stately acknowledgment of the woman's thoughtfulness.

"I thank you."

"That's all right, miss. Pleased, I'm shoer."

Thereafter the housekeeper turned her attention to the other foreigner. Going towards him she rubbed her hand on her apron, with the intimation of a prospective tip.

"I've lighted the fire, sir. Very pleased, I'm shoer." Her voice was brightly expectant, but Varaski merely grunted unsociably, and continued his examination of Jermyn Street.

"For what we are about to receive—I don't think!" A cutting comment on the situation. Having made this observation to herself she left them together, and toddled off downstairs.

At the sound of the closing door Varaski left the window and strode over to Marie by the fire, with a hint of exultation in his manner.

For some moments he watched her before speaking.

"It was a long journey from our country."

"Ours?" she ejaculated with bitterness.

"From mine, if you prefer."

A sneer was in his tone and on his lips. It goaded her to action like the quivering blow of a whip about her shoulders.

She rose, trembling with half-suppressed emotion.

"Before I do this terrible thing, I must be certain—quite, quite certain."

At her words he raised a warning hand, then cautiously opened the two doors. Not a sound came from below, and evidently both servants had retreated to their own quarters in the basement. Closing the doors, he listened once more. There was complete stillness.

Marie shivered again as there came to her a strange sense of foreboding.

"Silent—as a tomb," she whispered in a stifled voice.

Varaski eyed her thoughtfully. He, too, was conscious of some uncanny sensation, as though the future, past, and present had impinged on each other to become a living unity.

"If anyone desire to make it so."

As he spoke, he nodded slowly, the movement made heavy by some mysterious knowledge of what was to be.

"But you yourself need have no fear—so long as you keep to the bargain that has been made."

An all-too-vivid memory clutched her by the throat. She listened to him, her large, serious eyes holding a world of sorrow.

"The word of my country is to be trusted,

Mademoiselle. That is true. I assure you, on my honour."

"Your—honour. How can you talk of such a thing?"

"There is honour among thieves. So at least it has been said. How much more must there be—honour among *spies*."

"I implore you not to use that word, Varaski," she entreated.

He answered with a scoff.

"You do not like it? And yet you are content to do the work of a spy?"

"Content!" There was terrible bitterness in her voice. "You know very well why I agreed."

His eyebrows rose slightly, but with mockery rather than surprise. "There was a good reason, huh?"

Emotion welled up unconquerable within her.

"*Mon Dieu!* Do not remind me."

He simulated a concern which he by no means felt.

"Calm yourself, Mademoiselle. Those who would spy with success must keep quiet—here and—here." He indicated first his head and then his heart. "Only in such a way can we obtain that for which we seek."

"What must I aim at obtaining?"

The wild fanaticism slumbering in his nature was aroused by her words.

"Like me, you must seek the victory of my country and her great allies."

In her face appeared a profound disbelief.

"You really imagine you will prevail?"

He drew himself up with a certain defiance of Fate.

"It must be so in the end. In England we and our allies have had the help of Paul Morris. How much help you will never guess. Now that you have come to this country with your brains—and your beauty, we shall be helped even more."

As he spoke of her loveliness there was something in his manner which sent a chill of fear through her veins. What was the dark meaning of his words? She tried to thrust away a sudden horror, and turned to him with a set face.

"Can you rely on this man with such certainty?"

"In all things, Mademoiselle."

"Who is this Paul Morris that you should believe him to be so marvellous? Why should you have such faith in an Englishman? If he has betrayed his own nation, might he not do the same in turn to yours? A man, who is without honour, can be bought. He belongs to everyone—and to no one. Always he is to be purchased on an open market. 'Who is the highest bidder?' That is the one question always waiting to be answered."

Her remarks seemed to cause amusement, and she bridled with annoyance.

"There is nothing in my words to bring laughter. Paul Morris is an Englishman."

"Once he was a Bulgarian," Varaski replied with surprise at her ignorance. "The name which he bore was *not* Paul Morris. He changed it only when he became an Englishman before the War began, almost before it was conceivable. Almost, but not quite. You understand?"

"I am beginning to realize," and a sudden sense of hopelessness came over her.

"Because of his work as secret agent," the other

continued, "he thought it wiser to take a good British name. Very nice, very pleasant, very innocent. And now, after so many years, the good English trust him—as we trust him—to whom he, indeed, belongs."

"How cunning," there was disgust in her tone.

"How clever," came Varaski's correction. "You should make a better choice of words. That should be easy for you, with your gift for languages—your very great gift."

Something in the way he uttered the last phrase gave her an inkling of what he had in mind.

"Is it because of my knowledge of languages that you have brought me over here?"

"For what other reason? Paul Morris wrote to me many times that he had a great need of someone—like yourself."

She caught her breath. "Is that why you— Now I see it all. The whole thing was a trap to get me into your power!"

"And if it was, Mademoiselle?"

A gesture gave indication of his unconcern.

"So that was it."

A pause. Then she displayed a new and vital interest in her future.

"What sort of occupation is this Morris going to find me?"

It was important, he answered, and dangerous, he greatly feared. The pretended sympathy did not deceive her.

"Exactly what is it to be," he went on, "I cannot yet tell you, though I can well guess. I have come all the way to this country so that I may arrange everything"—he leered malignantly—"After I have

spoken with our good English friend the rest will depend on you. Much will depend, very, very much."

There was a dreadful significance in his remark.

"That, Mademoiselle, is why I journeyed with you to England. So that everything might be completely realized before you entered on your—responsibilities."

"No, Varaski. You came because you were afraid I might slip through your fingers," she gave a nervous laugh.

"You will never do so. And why? Because of the promise made to you."

She experienced terror. Suppose his country did not carry out that promise? She had placed herself in this man's power and stepped into a position of infinite danger.

"Yet I have not received so much as a line from your nation."

"You are mistaken, Mademoiselle. Before we set out on the journey, did I not give you something to place about your neck as a mascot?"

She raised her fingers nervously to the large smooth hoop of gold about her neck.

"But when you gave me this slave-bangle, you said only that its loss would possibly cost me my life."

"Which is perfectly true. Take it off, and examine it well. Do not fear, in this room you are quite safe."

Strangely disturbed she hesitated, though only for an instant. Then she removed the bangle with care, waiting for further instructions.

"Now press that spring. So! Inside the hollow

circle you will see a strip of very thin paper. Draw it out and read. You will find that you have had a line from my government all the while."

Marie stared at the paper with unbelieving eyes. She blanched on reading what was written there.

"A line that could hang me."

His eyes mocked her.

"And you have been wearing it around your neck! You do not like it? Destroy it, if you wish, but remember one thing before you do so. Unless you have that paper in your possession when you return from England to my country—it may be——"

At the unspoken threat her breathing came more rapidly, and she stood there in doubt, midway between two terrible possibilities.

"Do not fear, Mademoiselle. You have only to produce that written order—and the price shall be paid. Oh, yes, I promise you that. On my good name as a spy."

There was a touch of the whimsical in his utterance, something a little proud.

Marie Krajova could not help being impressed.

"I accept your assurance, Varaski." Just then, another thought came to her. "Can I trust this man, whom I have never met?"

"As the English trust him. There can be no surer promise."

Her eyes rounded with sarcasm. "It will be most interesting to meet this remarkable man."

His answer was diffident. "Like yourself, I have not yet met him. When I do so, I shall call it a great honour. For his work I have admiration of the most profound."

The door opened. At the sound he turned.

The man who was entering the room had black hair and a swarthy complexion. He addressed them in English, but with vowels as foreign as his appearance.

"I regret extremely to have kept you waiting. Most important business has obliged me to be absent from my rooms for several days."

"So this," thought Varaski, "is the man whom I have travelled so far to meet."

Then he made a bow and addressed the other in a tone of deep respect.

"It calls for no apology to work on behalf of our beloved country, my dear friend—if I may so call you."

After a second bow, he continued. "For many years we have been known to each other by correspondence, now at last we meet in the flesh. My name is Varaski. My business—but that demands no explaining, since I am here to carry out your wishes. This is Mademoiselle Krajova. It is she whom I have brought over to assist you in your splendid work. You will find in her all that you have demanded in your letters. There is no need to ask whether you are Paul Morris. Who else could you be?"

"Who indeed?" the new-comer responded with a slight laugh, advancing and shaking the other by the hand. For some moments they stood in silence, palm pressed to palm.

But the eyes which smiled into Varaski's were not those of Paul Morris. They belonged to another man.

CHAPTER X

DISGUISE

"My lucky star is in the ascendant," thought Alderson to himself, as he stood there, disguised and unrecognized, shaking hands with the head of the Bulgarian Secret-Service.

The arrival of a foreigner at the chambers in Jermyn Street had been announced to him over the telephone less than half an hour before. He had hurried off at once, feeling just the least bit nervous, if the truth must be confessed, at being called on so quickly to play his role for the first time in the presence of some unknown person, who might be on terms of closest intimacy with Paul Morris.

What an amazing gift of providence that Morris and Varaski should never have met each other in the past.

For although Alderson flattered himself that his disguise would pass muster in almost any circumstances, he was not completely satisfied as yet with his imitation of Morris's voice and manner.

He thought his attempt in that direction was fairly good on the whole, but not good enough to be serviceable in all weathers. Some way, he decided, must be found of subjecting his vocal efforts to expert criticism, since only by that method could he hope to deceive with complete certainty any persons who had been at all intimately acquainted with the real Paul Morris.

Fortunately for Alderson that particular danger of discovery had been eliminated as far as this man Varaski was concerned. In the forthcoming interview, therefore, he would be able to concentrate his attention on the task in hand.

The conversation must be carried through without the least suspicion being aroused in the foreigner's mind. He must on no account query Morris's identity and wonder if he were dealing with any other than the one whom he had travelled so far to see.

Before the War Alderson had been intimately acquainted with the Balkans for the best part of ten years, while carrying out the particular duties that fell to his lot as a cog in the wheels of the Intelligence Service.

During that period he had acquired a knowledge and facility of the Bulgarian language sufficient to enable him to pass as a native when necessary.

This fact, combined with a striking resemblance to Paul Morris in certain outstanding points, had resulted in his daring idea of impersonating the spy.

Thanks to Alderson's careful arrangements Morris himself had been spirited away so secretly that no one could possibly be aware of what had taken place, and now he was safely under lock and key for the duration of the War, and perhaps for even a longer period. Perhaps——

In spite of all the obvious advantages in the present position, Alderson was anxious to avoid unnecessary danger. In all probability he had become somewhat rusty in his command of the Bulgarian language. Accurate he might be, but not sufficiently fluent.

There was a simple way in which he could evade putting it to test on this occasion.

Varaski gave him a prompt opportunity of doing so by addressing him in that language. The presumed Morris at once held up his hand in a warning gesture, then gave an admonishing glance in the direction of the door.

"Not here, if you please," he replied in English. "I make it a rule only to speak this tongue. In time of War, such things may become of great importance."

As he continued, the tricks and vocal mannerisms became every moment a closer imitation of his original. Possibly he was assisted by the knowledge that this was in effect little more than a dress-rehearsal of the part. The growth of confidence would be valuable in preparing for those more vital tests which sooner or later were bound to come.

"I underrstand perrfectly," and Varaski bowed an elaborate acquiescence.

As though by mutual consent they turned towards Marie Krajova, who had been watching Alderson with a veiled look which concealed her thoughts.

Seeing their eyes on her she began to speak, and as she did so there was in her voice a strangely appealing quality of which Alderson at once became sensible.

"So you are Maurice Porloff."

This was not the name given in Morris's naturalization papers. If what this woman said was true, then the capture had been even more thrilling than he had supposed. At the thought Alderson's veins throbbed with the excitement of the moment.

He had heard the name of Porloff mentioned from

a variety of sources. Were the reports accurate which had reached him through the secret agents in Central and South-Eastern Europe?

If so, then this Morris, (or Porloff, since they were apparently one and the same), had been largely responsible for the Roumanian collapse that led to the advance of Mackerson and the Bulgarian forces, with some help from the Central powers.

In the Spring of 1917 the Roumanians had been driven back to Jassy. Now, a year later, King Ferdinand was apparently master of the Balkans. And the position had been brought about almost entirely by the hidden schemes of Porloff and Varaski working in conjunction. A triumph, indeed, for the Bulgarian Secret-Service.

And now in taking the name and place of Paul Morris, Alderson would enter into the opportunities that Porloff had possessed. If he could remain unsuspected and retain Varaski's trust, what might he not accomplish in the coming months?

Through the old Porloff the Bulgarians had overthrown Roumania and established the mastery of Ferdinand. What might not be accomplished by the new Porloff—alias Alderson—in his turn?

Was it beyond the bounds of possibility to bring about a complete reversal of the Balkan situation?

A vision of such a future appeared before his eyes, and his heart beat quicker at the sight.

The voice of Marie penetrated to him in the dreamland of his imagination.

"It is you, then, whose exploits have been rumoured throughout the Balkan States."

What attitude ought he to adopt? A show of secretiveness would best fit the part.

"You must forgive me, Mademoiselle, if I request you never to address me by the name of Porloff, never even to pronounce that word while you remain in this country."

A look of approval came into Varaski's face, and Alderson realized he had been correct in estimating the position.

"You may rely on my discretion," Marie replied at once. "I shall be most careful to comply with your wishes. Indeed, I quite realize the necessity for so doing."

A certain admiration showed in Alderson's eye.

"Do you know, Mademoiselle, there is not a trace of accent in your English? It is very different from mine, and as for your vocabulary, it is altogether amazing."

Suddenly it struck him that it might be unwise to set himself up as an authority without due explanation.

"These things can only be rightly appreciated by those like myself who have lived in England for a long time."

Marie gave a charmingly modest disavowal of any special gift.

"It is merely the instinct of the parrot, or perhaps the power of imitation inherited from the ancestral monkey. Besides," her face saddened, "some English blood flows in my veins. It comes from a distance, but it is there."

Try as he might, Alderson could not keep a certain hardness from his voice as he thought of the role Marie Krajova seemed prepared to play.

"Surely your name is Roumanian, is it not?"

She answered him in a low voice. "That is true. I was born at Bukarest."

He looked at her with a searching glance.

"You will excuse me, but in my work it is necessary to take every precaution. I do not wish to appear inquisitive, but—" he gave a shrug, "Roumania is the ally of England."

At these words the colour drained from Marie's face. She drooped like some lily, and when she answered her voice was barely audible.

"There is a reason for what I do."

Alderson sensed some situation which he did not understand. While he was debating with himself whether to question her further, an aggressive interruption of their conversation came from Varaski.

"A very good reason. You can trust Mademoiselle to carry out all your orders."

"Wishes," Alderson substituted from inherent courtesy. Having done so he felt somewhat troubled as to whether his correction had been quite in the true "Morris" spirit.

Marie spoke once again, and this time her tone was firm with resolve.

"I shall do whatever you ask."

"I am glad to know that."

Having said this, Alderson decided inwardly that the real Morris was probably accustomed to pay compliments—not of gallantry, but to serve his own purpose.

"To a woman of many gifts anything might be possible. With such beauty, charm and resolution, you might make any conquest."

Marie shook her head.

"I fear that I can do very little, but I am ready

to attempt a great deal in order to—win the reward that has been promised to me.”

Alderson looked away with swift repulsion. To think that for the sake of money a woman so lovely and so talented, with the face of an angel, could stoop to a double betrayal, of her own country and of an ally.

Varaski came closer to him and whispered in his ear.

“You see the position?”

He was answered in an undertone.

“So you have baited the trap well?”

An ugly look came into the Bulgarian’s eyes.

“Very well,” he raised his voice as he went on, “with something which she is most anxious to obtain. Is it not so, Mademoiselle?”

He questioned her deliberately, and at his words she gave way to a vehement outburst of emotion.

“*Mon Dieu*. I must, I must.”

As though the strain were too much she turned from them and went towards the fire, where she bent shivering over the flames.

Alderson gave an involuntary sigh while he watched her.

“A pity, a great pity,” he thought to himself.

Varaski’s voice broke into his contemplation.

“You did not intend to be away from your rooms?”

The observation was accompanied by a glance in the direction of the table where the unopened letters were piled.

Alderson gave an intimate smile, intending to convey a hint of mutual understanding.

“My absence was not altogether unexpected.”

Varaski winked knowingly.

"A little journey of business, yes? And you wished your servants to know nothing for certain about your return?"

"Precisely. That is why I gave no instructions about forwarding letters."

The other bent over the writing-table and took up the top letter from the pile with a significant head shake.

"Take care. Something has been happening while you were away. Your servants cannot be trusted. This letter has been opened and read by someone. Look at the glue along the edge!"

He picked up another, this time at random. "Here is the same thing. You can see for yourself."

Alderson examined both of them, and made an emphatic gesture of agreement.

"There is no doubt of it. But I have my reasons for giving such opportunities. All the same, it was very careless—of someone. I must see that it does not happen again."

There was a grim humour about his remark which was lost on the hearer.

"And now, my friend, tell me what work you have in mind for our new assistant."

As he spoke he rejoined Marie, who by this time had recovered her self-control.

"What *I* have in mind?" Varaski questioned, following him to the fire.

The emphasis of the word "*I*" and the tone of surprise, combined to warn Alderson that in some way he had made a false move. Instantly he decided to cover up the mistake by turning it into

a jest, and playfully tapped the Bulgarian on the shoulder.

"Of course, my friend, if you have no mind of your own—we can always follow my original suggestion."

Varaski laughed appreciatively, shaking his head in good-humoured reproof.

"For the instant you deceived me with your little piece of fun. I have no wish to change your most excellent plan. You asked for someone who was clever at languages, in order that you might make use of her in the Censor's Department of the British Government. I think your intention is not difficult to guess."

Alderson could hardly restrain a start at what he heard. So that was what had been in the mind of Paul Morris, when he asked Varaski to provide him with a brilliant linguist. A spy, working at the Censor's Office, could have been made useful in many ways.

That was obvious.

And now Marie Krajova had arrived in England with all the desired qualifications and prepared to obey orders, but there was no Morris to give them. Instead, there was—himself.

He looked into the distance, and, as he did so, a thought gradually took form in his mind.

Could she not still be made useful?

The words were framed by his lips, though no sound came.

Varaski turned to Marie with a look of enthusiasm.

"Did I not tell you that he was a most remarkable man? Hardly has he met you, and already he is

thinking how best to make use of your advantages. Once you are at the Censor's, who can tell how much can be accomplished—with his supervision?"

A bland smile came into the face of the supposed Paul Morris.

"I dare say I can imagine possibilities which have never entered your mind."

CHAPTER XI

WHEN THE BELL RANG

As Alderson finished speaking, the telephone bell began to sound. Removing the receiver, he listened with attention then replied:

"Quite— Correct."

There was a somewhat unusual emphasis on these first words delivered into the transmitter.

A short pause followed, as though one might count three, then he continued.

"Will you please hold the line? I'm afraid I must keep you waiting a minute or two."

Putting the receiver on the table Alderson proceeded to make his apologies.

"Some very important business. If you will return to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock— I think I can promise that everything will be settled to our satisfaction."

With an elaborate bow, he opened the double doors and waited for the two foreigners to precede him.

He heard the sound of footsteps descending and the dull thud of the front door.

Then he returned to the sitting-room, humming softly as he mounted the stairs. Looking out of the window, he watched the retreating figures of Varaski and Marie Krajova.

Then crossing to the telephone he took up the receiver again and began to speak, maintaining his

imitation of Paul Morris, which by now was becoming almost life-like.

"Who is that?—A friend?—What friend?—Quite correct."

A careful glance in the direction of the door was followed by a hearty laugh. For the first time since he had entered the house in Jermyn Street wearing his disguise, Alderson returned to his ordinary voice.

"Another time, don't get the wind up like that, Barwell. When you had rung up the telephone number jotted down by me for your use, you heard the words we agreed upon. 'Quite Correct', followed by a distinct pause. Surely you must have known things were all right?—Not my voice? Of course not. There were visitors present. I'll explain later.—Not a word, mind.—Absolutely to no one.—I mean that.—I want to be put through at once to Sir Hugo."

By the time Alderson rang off some minutes later, everything had been arranged. Marie Krajova would be given a formal interview, on his recommendation, with the proper authorities next day and forthwith enter on her duties as a Postal Censor.

He had praised her brilliant powers as a linguist. Throughout the conversation, however, he had made no mention of the circumstances in which she had first been brought to his notice.

He had come to a rapid decision that there was only one way to ensure the success of the plan which he had formulated in his mind. Absolute secrecy must be maintained. Varaski and Marie Krajova were in complete ignorance of his true identity and faithfully believed him to be the proper Paul Morris.

In the same way it was essential that Sir Hugo

Farningham and, indeed, the entire staff of the Postal Censors, should believe Marie to be on exactly the same footing as the rest. As a member of one of the allied nations she would be looked on as a keen striver for the triumph of the allied cause.

That she was really a spy in the pay of Varaski, the enemy agent, must remain known only to himself and to those who would be working secretly in conjunction with him to carry his scheme to success.

Like himself these would be wearing a cap of darkness, and no one would have the least idea of either their identity or their manner of working.

"Then we can consider it settled, Sir Hugo? Good. Miss Krajova shall arrive at the Censor's to-morrow at three. Oh, by the way, there is one favour I want to ask you. I wish my name on no account to be mentioned. It is to be kept out of the affair altogether. The application form? Perhaps you could put your signature. If you don't mind stretching the point, I shall be extremely grateful."

A pause, while he listened to Sir Hugo.

"No. No. Nothing of the sort. It's simply that the lady in question knows me by another name altogether."

A further pause.

"What's that? 'Man in his time plays many parts'? You've summed it up exactly."

Sir Hugo was somewhat addicted to Shakespearean tags.

"It's not merely the crooks who have a string of aliases. The point is that Miss Krajova has no idea of my connection with the Intelligence Service. If she had, it would frighten her out of her life."

There at least he was speaking the truth.

"That would be a pity," Alderson resumed.

"Unless I'm very much mistaken, she is going to be extremely useful during the coming months. So you won't forget about keeping my name out of it? Will you? It is really most important."

At this time a glint of amusement came into the speaker's eyes.

"Those are more or less my last wishes, Sir Hugo. No flowers by request."

Farningham interrupted with a comment.

"Precisely," Alderson agreed. "In any case you won't be seeing anything of me for a considerable time. You can take that as an absolute fact. If it is necessary to communicate with you, I'll find some way of doing so. Meanwhile Miss Krajova will arrive at Salisbury House at three o'clock. For whom shall she ask, by the way?"

Answered, he rang off.

So that was settled. The beautiful Roumanian girl was to be installed at the Censor's—and no questions asked, while he himself was to be left with a free hand to carry out his plans.

As yet neither Varaski nor Marie had the smallest suspicion that he was any other than Morris. But would he be able to maintain his assumption of the part to the end? That remained to be seen.

One thing at any rate must be done without loss of time, there must be some arrangement with the Blakes.

"An understanding"—he frowned—"or a misunderstanding." With a look of resolution he went to the window and glancing out, nodded to two men who seemed to be occupying themselves with

vague preparations for some sort of repairs on the other side of the road.

At a sign from him the men came across and transferred their attention to the state of the pavement immediately outside 315, Jermyn Street.

Satisfied with what he had seen, Alderson pressed firmly the button of the electric bell by the fireplace. At the summons the manservant and his wife stared at each other in some surprise.

"Who can that be? Morris always gives a quick ring two or three times over. All nervy. Never a long one like that."

"It's not those foreigners, neither. I heard them go out of the house only a minute or so since."

"Queer."

Once more the bell began ringing, deliberate, insistent.

"Better go. Whoever it is."

With a puzzled expression Blake mounted to the first floor landing, then hesitated a fraction of a second outside the sitting-room.

"Come in."

Apparently it was the voice of Morris. Yet there was something unfamiliar. The words sounded crisp, the tone commanding and dignified.

Morris and yet not Morris.

The manservant entered, feeling some astonishment as he did so. Instinctively his eyes turned to the writing-table where his master was in the habit of spending the greater part of the time.

In another instant Blake swerved round at the click of the key as it turned in the lock.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT MORNING

ALDERSON was seated at the breakfast-table in Morris's sitting-room having just finished his third and final cup of coffee.

He adored the beverage, unsweetened, that was to say. He simply could not stand sugar. It destroyed the natural taste of the roasted berries so far as he was concerned.

He looked round for a serviette but none was laid out in readiness. He disapproved of these easy-going Bohemian ways and decided they must be altered.

Must they though? That was the very point now confronting him.

He frowned, as he viewed a vista of little disagreeable facts which would have to be endured. Some of them he already realized, others he would discover soon enough. Far too soon to suit his passion for comfort.

As he was contemplating the possibilities of the situation he caught sight of his reflection in the small mirror, and what he saw there amused him considerably. The face of a foreigner with black hair and swarthy complexion grinned back at him with sympathetic appreciation of the position.

Taking up the morning's letters which he had been perusing, he thrust them into his pocket.

Or was it Morris's pocket?

Then he glanced at his watch. Or the other man's?

"I wonder what time Morris makes it?"

The jest pleased him.

Rising, Alderson crossed to the bell, and pressed it rapidly three or four times. While he did so, he gave himself a little nod of approval and then took his seat at the typewriter.

Having removed the cover of the machine with care, he brought a letter of the first delivery from his pocket and started to rattle off an answer to the communication, chuckling quietly to himself as each line of worn and broken type made its appearance on the paper. He was becoming well acquainted with the idiosyncrasies of the machine.

Blake entered with an oblong wooden tray, and began clearing away the breakfast things with the noiseless efficiency of the trained manservant.

All went smoothly till he took up the sugar basin and peered into it with a worried expression. Then he hesitated and broke the silence.

"Excuse me, sir."

Alderson stopped typing and looked up.

"Well?"

"It's only a small thing, sir."

An emphatic headshake contradicted the statement.

"Nothing is small in my work. At any time the slightest error may destroy the labour of months."

In spite of wearing the disguise in which he had arrived, he was speaking in his natural voice.

"It's the sugar," Blake explained, "Mr. Morris always took three lumps and had his coffee black.

You will need to recollect that when there are callers."

"Thank you for the hint. I see you understood my meaning in our little talk last night."

Alderson took a cigarette from a box lying handy on the smoker's cabinet near the pedestal table. Lighting up, he puffed contentedly while he watched the clearing away of the morning meal.

The routine had only progressed for a minute or two when the servant stopped, sniffed several times, and glanced at the smoker to verify his suspicions.

"That will be another thing, sir. Those are only kept for visitors. Mr. Morris himself touches nothing but cigars."

Producing a key, Alderson opened the cabinet, extracted a cedar box and eyed the contents rather doubtfully.

"They look very dark."

Passing the cigar beneath his nostrils he made a slight grimace before thrusting the weed between his teeth in a spirit of resignation. Striking a match he started on a task which seemed likely to provide but little enjoyment.

"Surely, sir, there is no need to smoke these when there's no one from outside to see you?"

"That is perfectly true," Alderson watched the thickening cloud of smoke with growing aversion, "but I should say they will want a good deal of preliminary practice before I can appear to find pleasure in smoking them."

"Can I do anything further, sir?"

"Nothing, carry on."

"Very good, sir."

The servant completed his task and took the tray

to the door. There he paused and gave his new master an appealing look.

"What is it?"

"My calling-up notice, sir. I'm due to report for military service. As these will be my last days in civilian life, I was wondering whether—well, I was just wondering, sir. That's all."

"Have you the paper on you?"

It appeared that Blake had.

Alderson glanced through the document then to the other's surprise put it away in his pocket book.

"That will be all right. I'll see to whatever is necessary. There is no need for you to trouble further."

"Very good, sir."

Alderson proceeded to make the position clearer.

"You will be under my immediate orders, but will remain in your civilian kit. Everything will go on here exactly as usual. Exactly. That is of the utmost importance."

Something fresh came into his mind.

"There is only one thing that worries me. I am quite aware that you can be trusted, but what about your wife?"

He glanced at the other sharply.

"Can you rely on her in an affair of this kind?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Absolutely?"

Alderson had become very stern in manner.

"Yes, sir."

"You are certain? Is there any doubt on the point? If so, then, until my work here is at an end, I'll arrange for a comfortable job for Mrs. Blake in the West of England, where she will be safely out

of the way—" he gave a cough, and put it more tactfully—"Safely out of harm's way."

But the manservant seemed to think she would keep her mouth shut whatever happened.

"There's no cause for you to trouble your head about that, sir."

The Secret-Service man appeared satisfied with the assurance. He had an unfailing instinct where he could put his trust.

"It is only right to warn you. If the slightest hint leaked out of what was taking place, it would be extremely serious for everyone concerned. So please impress that on your wife."

As Blake was leaving the sitting-room, the front-door bell sounded.

"Will you see anyone, sir?"

Alderson gave a meaning smile.

"Everyone! From now on."

The door closed.

With grim determination he concentrated on the cigar and puffed away with intent earnestness.

The room should be in the customary state of fumigation, whoever the caller might prove to be.

CHAPTER XIII

THE DEATH SENTENCE

"EVERYTHING has been arranged," Alderson announced in Morris's voice. "Mademoiselle will be able to enter on her duties at the Censor's without delay."

With a gesture of elaborate politeness, he invited Marie Krajova to a seat.

"You will attend for a formal interview at three o'clock this afternoon."

As he made this statement he produced from the depths of a pocket a buff-coloured document on which the official particulars had been entered.

This he offered to the girl with an exhibition of courtesy even more elaborate than the preceding one. Excessive for the role he was portraying? An impossibility, if Blake's promptings with regard to Morris's manners and customs were trustworthy.

Before Marie could receive the paper, Varaski thrust out his hand and took possession of it instead. At such an exhibition of deliberate rudeness she flinched and Alderson's rapid glance showed equal annoyance. At that moment there was a certain intimacy of understanding between the two. For the time being Alderson even forgot that she had come there as a spy, and when he recalled her actual position, it was to experience a feeling of pity at the tragedy rather than of resentment at her treacherous conduct.

He gave a start on hearing her address a question to him.

"Shall you not accompany me to the interview?"

There was a slight quaver in her tone.

"Unfortunately I am unable to do so," he answered with decision.

At this point Varaski joined their conversation.

"There is no reason for you to be nervous, Mademoiselle. The truth, no doubt, has been well concealed."

In the Bulgarian's eyes there was half-query, to which Alderson responded with a broad smile.

"Nothing whatever is suspected, I am happy to say."

"Excellent," Varaski observed, and washed his hands in the invisible water of his satisfaction.

Alderson beamed a second time.

"I am glad that my assurance has pleased you."

While Marie listened to this exchange of remarks between the two men, she became conscious of a strangeness in the atmosphere. It was something which defied analysis. A certain unreality perhaps.

She watched them both with close attention.

Varaski consulted a wrist-watch.

"Time is passing. There is no need for me to remain here any longer. You will know only too well, my friend, what now should be done. It would be absurd for me to offer suggestions."

Alderson indicated that he was beginning to see his way rather clearly.

"In that case," Varaski replied, "it only remains for me to hand over to you the special and complete list of our secret agents."

As Alderson heard this he became very still,

fearing lest he should betray the thrill he was experiencing.

In spite of maintaining an imperturbable exterior, his blood tingled as he saw Varaski rip open the lining of a small bag which he had brought, and produce from this hiding-place a number of closely-written pages.

"Everything is in code, for greater safety. Discovery was hardly likely, but one must be prepared for accident. Many of these spies will already be known to you by name, but of the remainder you have, so far, been in ignorance. During the last eighteen months, however, you have given me very many proofs of your devotion to our cause, and of your wonderful management of difficult situations. Because of all this, I have decided to appoint you the head, not only of our organization in Great Britain, but of our Intelligence Service in Western Europe."

With these words, Varaski handed over the complete list of secret agents.

Having received it, Alderson hesitated, while his eyes wandered to the picture of "The Storm" hanging in the recess. Had Varaski any knowledge of the hiding-place existing behind the sliding panel? If not, it would be better that he should continue in ignorance.

One never knew what situation might arise. Especially when one was playing the dangerous game of Diamond Cut Diamond.

For that reason, the supposed Morris locked the list away for the time being in the writing-table, and while doing so, gave a casual glance down the street. The two men who had been "at work" there the

previous day, were again present. One of them looked up at the window inquiringly, then made a sign to a loafer, who was leaning against the lamp-post some fifty yards away.

Moving from the window, Alderson faced the Bulgarian with a glint of cynical amusement.

"Now I can deal with the position with complete confidence."

"Thank you, my friend." Varaski clasped him by the hand.

Once more Marie had an odd sensation that in reality everything was not as it seemed on the surface.

Was there some rivalry? Some feeling of resentment, because to-day's display of confidence had not been given earlier in the association of the two men?

That must be the explanation, for what other could there be?

Varaski prepared to take his leave.

"There are still some little things which require investigation before I set out on my return journey."

Marie rose, supposing that she would be expected to accompany him from the house.

"No, no. You will remain here, Mademoiselle. From this time forward you will be under the control of Morris. No doubt there will be already various instructions for you to receive."

"Do you wish me to stay?" she asked Alderson.

"It would be best, perhaps. We can then make the arrangements necessary."

With a gesture of acquiescence she resumed her seat.

"It will be important," Alderson went on to explain, "for me to learn as far as possible all that is going on. Therefore, I shall ask Mademoiselle to report here after her work has been finished at the Censor's."

Varaski seemed pleased at the idea. It was yet another sign of the efficiency, which had delighted him so much in the past. He smiled approval.

"In that way things cannot go wrong."

"I hope not," was the cheerful reply of the supposed Paul Morris.

There was still something which Varaski wished to explain before leaving.

"If by the end of six months you have been pleased with the work of Mademoiselle, you will send her to me with a code message informing me that her task has been completed."

He glanced at Marie with an air of challenge as he made mention of the code. It was evident he did not entirely trust her.

"When Mademoiselle arrives in Bulgaria, she will bring the paper, concealed in the secret place that has been arranged between us"—guessing what he intended, she touched the neck-bangle, and a slight inclination of his head showed her supposition was correct—"After having delivered the message, she will receive the reward which has been promised."

A hardness came into Alderson's eyes as he heard these words, but he revealed nothing of his feelings.

When Varaski went on there was a threat in his tone.

"Should Mademoiselle refuse to carry out your orders you will inform me at once by a code message, through our usual channel. As soon as

that information reaches me a life shall pay the penalty."

Then his eyes narrowed till they became ugly slits, as he turned them in the direction of the girl.

"I see Mademoiselle realizes my meaning."

A bow of leave-taking and he was gone.

Alderson and Marie Krajova were alone.

Strolling over to the window, he waved a hand as though bidding the enemy agent a final farewell. At a sign from one of the workers in the street below, the man by the lamp-post sauntered off in the direction which Varaski had taken.

Satisfied that the trailing of the Bulgarian's movements would proceed according to plan, Alderson turned his attention once more to the girl.

"I fancy we have seen the last of Varaski for some long time."

"I suppose so," came the answer in an abstracted voice. The speaker's thoughts were far away.

Alderson began to pace the room, to and fro, to and fro, while he turned over in his mind the scene which had just taken place. In Varaski's words there was some veiled meaning which had eluded him.

Spies might work on behalf of their own country merely from patriotism, without a thought of personal gain, but those who betrayed their fatherland could be actuated by cupidity alone. The price was all that mattered to them, the amount to be paid depending on the risks incurred and on the value of the information to be obtained. There was nothing mysterious, therefore, about Varaski's statement that Marie Krajova was to receive a

reward for carrying out instructions to the satisfaction of those to whom she was responsible.

But what of the strange threat the man had made? "Should Mademoiselle refuse to carry out your orders a life shall pay the penalty."

Whose life? Not hers apparently. Whose else? A lover's? Could that be the explanation? If so, she was acting not of her own free will, but under compulsion.

By some means he must discover the real facts. Yet in so doing he dared take no risk. He must continue to play the part of Morris.

Suddenly he came to a halt, his back to the window, and fixed his piercing eyes on Marie.

"Before we go further, I must know the truth. There is something you are concealing from me."

Her fingers twitched nervously, but she made no response. What was he to do? Play the bully? Frighten her story from her by threats?

In a flash he saw the solution. In his role of Morris he could feign to distrust her, and so demand proofs that she could be depended on faithfully to serve him.

"Those who work for me must withhold no secrets, since unless I can be absolutely sure of you, you will be of no use to me. You will have no chance either to obey orders—or disobey them—because none will be given. I shall inform Varaski that I do not consider you trustworthy."

"No!" Her face blanched, while her eyes made appeal.

He only shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"You are a Roumanian, yet you would have me believe you have come to England prepared to spy

against your own allies. How am I to know you are not here in order to betray us? How can I be sure it is not a trap?" Suddenly he pointed an accusing finger. "It is one!"

"I swear not!" came the desperate answer. "How could it be? Would Varaski have brought me here if he had not been sure of me?"

"Varaski was always weak where a beautiful woman was concerned. You will find I am not so easily taken in."

He folded his arms and regarded her with calmness.

"How can you expect trust, if you will not give it? I'm sorry. You would have been admirable for my purpose, but it is no use. I cannot employ you."

"Cannot?"

"Dare not. Unless"—he waited so long that the suspense became an agony to her—"Unless I have some hold over you."

At his words she made a pitiful gesture of despair. "You have the same hold that Varaski has. My brother's life. He is in a Bulgarian prison under sentence of death."

So he had obtained the truth at last. With a movement of the hand he urged her to recount the facts.

"Alexis had left Bukarest for one of the villages where the fighting was going on. There was some reason why he had to get out there, but he would not tell me what it was. The very night after he reached the place it was surrounded by a party of Bulgarian troops, and when they captured him with the others, they charged him with firing on them.

The penalty was death. You see, he was a civilian. But I am sure he never did it. I do not believe that it was true." A flash of defiance was in her eyes. "In some way it was a trick."

He gave a curious look.

"What makes you think so?" There was no anger in his voice. Perhaps she had expected it, for a certain surprise came into her face, then passed away as she answered his question, speaking with nervous rapidity.

"A few nights after the news reached Bukarest Varaski arrived at our home and asked to see me on urgent business. He gave no name but said he was—a messenger. When we were alone he told me there was a way by which I could save my brother's life if I wished. *Mon Dieu!* If I wished."

A terrible anguish came into her voice.

"That is why I am here. If I do not obey orders Alexis will be shot."

A shudder passed over her. A moment later she collapsed in a flood of tears.

CHAPTER XIV

THE EXPLOSION

A BUSTLE of preliminary movement passed down the platform and Varaski entered the train which was to bear him off on the first stage of his homeward journey to Bulgaria.

According to the passport and collection of tickets in his pocket, he was a citizen of a friendly nation on his way to a coast town in Northern Italy.

The enemy agent leaned from the window of a first-class compartment and smiled effusively at the black-haired, swarthy-complexioned, foreign-looking individual who had come to the station to see him off.

"I am glad last night's air-raid warning proved after all to be merely a false alarm," observed the *soi-disant* Paul Morris.

"We should have known in good time had an attack on London been fixed," the other reminded him in an undertone.

"Quite so," was the swift reply.

The train began to puff slowly away from the platform.

The final farewell uttered, Alderson continued to wave amicably till the figure of the Bulgarian was lost in smoky haze.

Then at last he permitted himself the luxury of being natural for a few moments. Feeling tolerably safe from prying eyes he sighed with relief and

followed the sigh with a slight shudder of disgust when he recalled unpleasantly the kiss that Varaski had administered on either cheek before mounting from platform to railway carriage. One must indeed suffer to be a spy if these demonstrations of polite affection were to be endured.

Diamond Cut Diamond. What progress was being made in the first moves of the game? That he would soon learn.

A glance at the railway clock by the main booking-office showed that he was a quarter of an hour behind hand with his arrangements.

He left the station and passing out into the main thoroughfare, beckoned a crawling taxi to a standstill. On entering the vehicle he gave the number of some club premises near Jermyn Street.

When the vehicle came to a standstill outside that address, he descended, paid off the driver and dawdled on the pavement, his thoughts, to all seeming, far away. In an assumption of half-abstraction his eyes followed the taxi till it vanished down Charles Street in the direction of the Haymarket.

Afterwards, he appeared to change his mind about entering the club. Instead of doing so, he turned up that particular York Street which runs northward past the Sports Club. When he had gone some thirty yards a beggar came forward from the shelter of a porch, and held out his hand somewhat tentatively. The action was accompanied by a muttered, "Thank you, sir. Thank you kindly."

The expression of gratitude might have appeared odd had any casual pedestrian paused to notice that no alms had been received by the mendicant.

As it happened, the incident was being viewed

by someone who at that precise moment was gazing out from one of the windows of the large club smoking-room. The man had reason for being interested, seeing that he himself had written the message contained in the small slip of paper being delivered thus surreptitiously to Alderson.

"All clear," the beggar whispered, and there was a curious sense of intimacy in his tone. The moment was quickly over, and touching his hat respectfully, he retired once more to the shelter of the doorway.

Alderson himself loitered on up the incline until he reached Jermyn Street, then turned in the direction of Number 315. Immediately, the beggar started in the opposite direction, making off towards St. James's Square.

At the same time the sportive-looking individual disappeared from the window looking on to York Street. A minute or so later he emerged from the club-house and, rounding the corner, walked briskly in Alderson's footsteps.

When the latter had reached his own number he did not open the front door at once. Instead he began fumbling with his key in the lock. Had a sudden clumsiness attacked him? Could he be deliberately delaying till someone joined him?

At any rate, one fact was indisputable. When the club member drew near the house he was overcome by a tiresome cough. On the noise reaching Alderson's ear, the key straight away fitted into the lock as though by magic. As he opened the door he heard the voice of the clubman immediately behind him.

"How are you, Morris? Back in town again, eh?"

At the words, Alderson swung round, smiled genially, and gave his now familiar impersonation of the man who was at that very moment safely under lock and key in one of His Majesty's prisons.

"Returned yesterday. What about coming up for a spot of something?"

"I ought not," the sportive-looking gentleman rather quickly objected.

"Nonsense, my dear fellow."

"Very well, Morris, if you insist."

Satisfied that any passers-by or inquisitive neighbours would look on the meeting as quite a casual one, the two men entered the house together and without speaking ascended to the sitting-room on the first floor. Arrived there, Alderson sharply pressed the bell three times in succession. The summons was answered by the manservant with alacrity—in the Blakian sense of the word.

"You wished for something, sir?"

"No one is to be allowed to enter until I give further orders."

"Not even if——"

"When I say no one——"

"Very good, sir," and the man's mouth closed with an audible snap.

In giving the instructions, Alderson had spoken in his normal voice.

It was evident that Blake was perturbed to find his new master apparently committing such an oversight. He swelled with indignation.

"Here have I been coaching the guv'nor to play the part of Morris, so's no one can tell the difference, and now he is giving away the whole show before a complete stranger."

The thought showed itself clearly in Blake's face and Alderson could not restrain his amusement.

"Don't be alarmed; nothing has gone wrong. My visitor is Inspector Wilson of Scotland Yard. He doesn't really look like this."

On receiving the information, Blake deflated rapidly—or appeared to do so—from a sense of sheer relief.

"Thank goodness for that, sir. I was half-afraid."

A nod of dismissal.

Blake retired once more to his quarters in the basement, while Alderson eyed his visitor humorously.

"How did you think our little episode passed off outside the house?"

The Inspector stared hard for a moment, then blinked astonishment.

"To me your performance of Morris was perfectly extraordinary. During those days when I had him under observation I came to know all his little tricks fairly well. In the street just now you would have hoodwinked me, that's a fact. If I hadn't known for certain that our man was safely under lock and key, I'd have sworn anywhere to his identity."

Alderson was gratified at the evident genuineness of the other's praise.

"I'm glad my little attempt at impersonation struck you as reasonably near the real thing. I'm having a hard try at making an artistic success of the job."

"You're doing that all right," was the admiring answer.

"I'm relieved to hear you say so. As you've

made a special study of Morris, you know what you're talking about. I need hardly tell you that it's most important for me to be able to convince everyone who has been connected with him in the past."

"You'd never guess what a splendid ally I have in this," the Secret-Service man added, after an affectionate glance at the typewriter.

The Inspector contemplated the machine with surprise.

"That antiquated contraption? What's the joke? I'll buy it."

"Oh, I'm perfectly serious in what I said," was the assurance, though it failed to dispel the element of doubt.

"But it looks such a broken-down old thing," Wilson expostulated.

"Exactly," was the triumphant response. "You may think it strange that Morris should have cared to use such a battered war-horse for his correspondence. Wait a moment, and I'll make it quite clear."

Alderson seated himself in front of the typewriter and tapped out the alphabet, repeating the process in capitals. Having done this, he concluded with the various stops and figures, and finally handed the result to the Inspector.

"If you examine these with care, you will find that the top of the 't' is worn away to such an extent, that it is impossible to distinguish it from 'i'. Further, the 'e' bears a close resemblance to the 'c', through portions of the type being worn away by the sands of time."

"His remark was received with a grunt of agreement, and he continued his explanation of the case.

"The bottom of the 'g' is hardly visible, and the 'h' can barely be distinguished from the 'n'."

"I must certainly confess I couldn't tell one from the other."

Alderson wound up by pointing to the two letters which had dropped from their correct alignment.

Wilson emitted a grunt of disgust before speaking his thoughts aloud.

"I can't quite make out all this. Morris was in no financial difficulty, so much is obvious"—he glanced round the room with appraising expression—"Do you suppose it was sentiment that caused him to retain this broken-down relic? If so, why did he not send it off to be repaired?"

When Alderson responded the words came with meaning deliberation.

"And make it standard like the rest of them?"

The truth dawned on Wilson at last.

"So that is the explanation. Of course, I see it now. A letter typed on this ramshackle affair would be quite unmistakable."

"Precisely," was the smiling answer. "A mere signature can be imitated. But I doubt if anyone could possibly forge all the individual peculiarities of this typewriter. In fact, the possession of it is considerably more than half the battle in carrying out the correspondence with Morris's clientele. No one could defy the *bona fide* of a communication thumped out on that machine."

The Inspector agreed, and then he screwed up his eyes in a contemplative manner.

"It was a wonderful piece of good luck for you that Varaski had never actually met Morris, but it

strikes me you were all the better out of it as far as that Roumanian girl was concerned. She looks to me exceptionally brainy."

Alderson nodded in a decisive way.

"Evidently a little cherub up aloft has been looking after me so far." He sank into one of the arm-chairs. "And now tell me what has been going on at the Censor's. You said one of your men would be ringing up to make a report."

"Krajova's interview took place yesterday afternoon as arranged. She was started straight off in Room D 14, and up to the present there has been no hitch of any kind."

"Capital."

"Her Censor number will be 583."

Alderson jotted down the figures.

"By the way, Wilson, when I phoned up a couple of nights ago to tell you I was intending to start a scheme at the Censor's as an outcome of the Morris affair, it was quite a surprise to hear that you already had a couple of your subordinates planted there."

The Inspector gave a slight laugh.

"It would astonish a good many people, I'm thinking. I don't mind telling you something between ourselves. I believe even the chief himself knows nothing about it."

"Sir Hugo, eh?" Alderson's eyebrows rose slightly. "Oh, well, that's not my affair. All I need to know is that you are in a position to assist in any scheme I may adumbrate."

At the last word Wilson gave a sniff of amusement.

"You'll find everything will be all right except for

the 'adumbrating'. You can hardly expect Scotland Yard to tackle that sort of thing."

"Never mind, I'll excuse them if they do the rest of the job to my satisfaction," was the light answer.

"Now what exactly does this job comprise?" During the next half-hour the Inspector gave Alderson his full attention while everything was being explained. Afterwards, he remained silent for some time, drumming with his fingers in rhythmic monotony until at last he turned his eyes on Alderson and expressed an opinion.

"If your plan comes off, I should say it will be one of the biggest stunts in counter-espionage that could be carried out at this stage of the War. Who can say how far-reaching the effects might be? It is even conceivable——"

Suddenly the windows rattled violently as the sound of an explosion reached them from Piccadilly.

"Daylight raid, eh?" Alderson instantly remarked. "Arrived now instead of last night. Unless I'm very much mistaken, a packet's been dropped not many yards from the Circus."

The Inspector threw open the window, listened, and shook his head.

"Can't hear any planes up. Besides, when I left the Yard half an hour ago, there was no talk of 'visitors' from abroad having been sighted." He frowned to himself. "It's more likely to be an infernal machine of some kind. Lately there have been a lot of funny rumours about. You've probably heard some of them."

Leaning out of the window, Wilson was about to question someone, who was hurrying across the road from the direction of the sound, but there was

no need to do so. The information was tendered before he had time to ask.

"G.P.O. mail van blown to smithereens. The stuff has been hurled all over the place."

"And the driver?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. There was no need for words.

"Do they know how it happened?"

"Explosives among the parcels, so I heard someone say. Like the Nihilist outrages."

The Inspector shut down the window, and wheeled round to hand on the information, but just then the telephone began to ring.

Alderson raised the receiver and listened. As he did so, a startled look came into his face.

CHAPTER XV

THE MISSING COUNTER-SIGN

"THAT bomb was intended for Lord Martingdon. I'm almost certain of it."

After a few minutes' conversation, Alderson had clapped his hand suddenly over the transmitter, so that his words should be inaudible over the wire, as he addressed Wilson.

"What makes you so sure?" the Inspector asked. A violent headshake warned him to say no more and Alderson spoke into the telephone with impatience.

"Hullo! Hullo! *Hullo!*"

The sudden rise and fall of his shoulders bore witness to his exasperation.

"Damnation. We've been cut off."

He clicked down the receiver with an air of finality.

"Accidentally?" Wilson inquired.

"I don't think so," was the reply. "In fact, I'm pretty certain she's taken fright."

"A woman, eh?"

"Foreign, with a lot of accent. Not French or Italian."

"Teutonic? Scandinavian?"

"More of the Slav, I should say. Anyhow, some special signal had evidently been arranged between her and Morris. Obviously I gave the wrong answer."

It makes you so positive?"

Instead of replying to this, Alderson removed the receiver.

"Hullo, miss! Yes, I was. You disconnected us before we'd finished. The number? That's exactly what I want to know. Will you try and trace the call? Yes, please. It's urgent. Special inquiry. Official."

He gave a certain combination of letters which showed the operator exactly how the land lay.

"Hold the line, please," came her response. "I'll do my best."

After a short time he heard the girl again.

"It was not a private number. The call came from a public office in the City."

"Do you know the whereabouts?"

"The Underground station at Moorgate Street."

Alderson gave an exclamation of annoyance.

"Why were we cut off in the middle of our conversation?"

"The receiver must have been replaced at the other end."

"Then you know nothing beyond that?"

"Absolutely nothing."

Which ended the matter.

He turned to the Inspector and took up their discussion where it had been broken off.

"I'll tell you what makes me so sure about there being some prearranged signal to which I failed to give the counter-sign. When I began to listen, there was a low-pitched, foreign voice coming over the wire. 'Hullo-Hullo! Hullo! Hullo-Hullo! Hullo!' There was a certain sense of rhythm about the way the words were being repeated."

"Quite likely."

"Something made me think the answer might be a reversal of the intervals. 'Hullo! Hullo-Hullo! Hullo! Hullo-Hullo!' Only a shot in the dark, but a lucky one. It hit the mark."

"Good. I heard you speak, and afterwards your face showed there was something of the kind. What happened next?"

"She said 'One nought one' was speaking, and added that she had remained near Clansdon House as long as she could, but had heard nothing of the birthday present."

"Heard nothing? What a curious expression to use for anything of that sort."

"Very," Alderson agreed, and his gaze wandered thoughtfully in the direction of the spot where the explosion had taken place. Then he went on with his narrative.

"At last, she added she could wait no longer, as she was already late, so had gone off at once to the place where she worked."

"Where was that?"

"Naturally she did not say. It might have been too incriminating. As Morris, I was obviously supposed to know already. When she arrived there, she heard a rumour about the parcel branch of the G.P.O. having been disorganized because of the air-raid warning. So she telephoned to me—or rather to Morris—at the first opportunity to ask whether I had heard anything of the birthday present."

"Do you believe the phrase 'heard anything' referred to the bomb?"

"Doesn't that fit in with the facts? If the

'birthday present' had reached Clansdon House, as arranged, we should have 'heard something' of it all right. Thank the gods for that air-raid warning. If it hadn't been for the false alarm, instead of that poor fellow being blown to pieces in Piccadilly, it might have been——"

The Inspector mopped his forehead.

"I don't think there can be much doubt of the connection."

Then he looked inquiringly at Alderson, who was rapidly turning over the leaves of a reference book.

"Martin, Martin, Martingdon. Here we are! This is his birthday, so we may consider that settled, eh?" Wilson gave a nod of agreement, and Alderson went on. "Now we come to the point where I slipped up. The catastrophe could hardly have been avoided, I am afraid. There was no reference to this Nihilist business in any of Morris's papers, either in the safe or the roll-top desk. I went through everything rather thoroughly!"

"I believe you! How did you come to grief?"

"The woman asked why I had omitted the counter-sign, after she had given the number. I answered—in the excitement I had evidently forgotten to do so."

The Inspector's face wrinkled with sympathetic annoyance.

"Temporizing was the only thing to do, I suppose, in the circumstances. Of course, she asked you to give the counter-sign straight away."

Alderson frowned.

"Exactly. She repeated the formula for the second time—'One nought one speaking'—and waited for my reply. As I had no possible clue to

go on, I remained silent. After a few seconds she gave the signal a third time. Just the same words as before, but spoken more rapidly. Evidently by this time she was nervous, and while I was deciding what to do I was cut off."

"Before you could discover her identity. That's a tremendous pity," Wilson commented, after listening with great attention. "So it amounts to this. A bomb was dispatched to Clansdon House, obviously intended for Lord Martingdon. It ought to have arrived by this morning's parcel delivery—as a birthday present—but the postal routine was upset because of the 'general warning' sent out, so the infernal machine exploded before it reached the address. The woman responsible for sending it was in league with Paul Morris, and rang up his number from a public telephone box at Moorgate Street. You neither know her name nor where she worked, but from her accent you fancy she might belong to one of the Slav races. And there's the end of it."

"Not altogether," Alderson contradicted. "There are, after all, a few facts to go on."

The Inspector turned his eye moodily to the ceiling."

"You're quite right as far as that goes, only it doesn't go very far. There are such crowds of foreigners about London in these days. Besides, she may have been adopting another accent for some special purpose?"

"When she rang up Paul Morris himself to the best of her belief? No. I think we may dismiss that possibility."

As Alderson made the pronouncement he eyed the telephone fixedly. "If only they could invent

some way of seeing the person at the other end of the line."

"I dare say they will, in time."

"But not in our time. They couldn't help us in our present predicament," came the quick retort.

There was something almost fretful in Alderson's tone as he went on:

"The voice was distinctive in quality and exceptionally deep in pitch. Then the accent was very odd, indeed, and the pronunciation of several words altogether different from anything I have ever heard before. Taking all this together, it is possible I might recognize the speaker if I ever chanced to meet her anywhere."

But the other dismissed the idea.

"I doubt it very much. In fact, I'm sure you will never do so. The telephone has a way of altering voices a good deal. Before now, when I have listened over the wire to someone I've known quite well, I couldn't tell who was speaking and have had to ask the name."

For some time there was silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock.

Then at last Alderson spoke in a half-whisper. Was he addressing his companion or thinking aloud? It was hard to know.

"Perhaps there is another clue. Why did she call herself 'One nought one'?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE SORTER OF LETTERS

"ONE NOUGHT ONE", owner of the mysterious voice, left the telephone-booth at Moorgate Street Station and made off in the direction of the Censor's Office in Finsbury Square.

In the early days of the War this important department had been functioning at the G.P.O., but now all that was ancient history. For some considerable time the work had been carried out at Salisbury House.

There was a worried expression in the eyes of Censor 101 as she hurried along.

When a few minutes earlier she had rung up Paul Morris's telephone number, as she had been instructed to do in cases of urgency, she had heard his voice in answer. At least, so it seemed to her.

Yet when she had given the usual signal as arranged, he had omitted to answer with the counter-sign. Never before had he made that blunder. After delivering the message which hinted discreetly at the feared miscarriage of the bomb, she had called attention to his oversight. Rather nervously, it must be confessed, for Morris was quick to take offence. And when he did——

Ugly rumours had reached her of what happened afterwards if he cast anyone aside. When he was displeased with those who were in possession of secrets he did not follow the old adage, "Give a man enough rope and he'll hang himself". He had a quick method of obtaining the same result. It

was said to be carried out on somewhat similar lines, but in such a way that a verdict would be returned of "suicide while temporarily insane".

Greatly daring, she had repeated her inquiry for the counter-sign. An ominous silence had followed.

Startled, bewildered, she had cut off the telephone and left the station as rapidly as possible, fearing to take further risks.

Something was wrong, that was evident enough, but what she could not be certain.

Was Morris angry at her message, or could there be some more sinister explanation? The latter alternative, however, she dismissed as impossible.

If he wished to communicate with her, he knew how to reach her. She would wait a few days to see if any further developments took place.

In any case, there would soon arrive the regular monthly meeting to receive her salary as secret agent. Then she would be able to learn what had really happened.

On reaching Salisbury House she made her way to Room D 14 without loss of time. Already her absence had been overlong, and Mrs. Johnson, the Deputy Assistant Censor, was looking at the clock with some impatience.

Noting this, "One Nought One" glided to her place as noiselessly as possible, and took her seat with a feeling of relief, believing she had escaped observation. In that, however, she was mistaken.

"Miss Loschka?"

The D.A.C. was calling her by name from the small table near the fireplace.

She rose reluctantly.

"Yes, Mrs. Johnson?"

Her voice was very deep and somewhat emotional. In its tone was a curious quality, rarely to be heard.

"You asked leave to go out for a few minutes in order to telephone. I gave you permission, in spite of the fact that you were late in arriving this morning, because you said it was most important."

"I am vairy grateful for yourr kindness."

The head of the room gave her subordinate a withering glance.

"That may be. But I had no idea you intended to be so long absent."

"I did not intend it," Loschka expostulated, with an assumption of innocence. "It was deeficult to obtain the number of my friend."

Mrs. Johnson was not to be calmed down so easily.

"The same thing happened only a fortnight ago. Surely you could have waited until one o'clock?"

There was no trouble in finding a suitable reply to this move.

"At that hour it is also my friend take the dinner."

The D.A.C. did not care to pursue the game of question and answer any further. Instead, she mounted the high horse of authority.

"It must not happen again. In future, if I allow you to go out, you will make up at the end of the day any time you think it necessary to absent yourself. So you will know exactly what to expect if you are away again for half an hour."

"Twenty minutes," protested the Russian, only to receive a crushing answer.

"Twenty-five to be absolutely accurate."

Loschka meekly returned to her place.

There was a silence, interrupted from time to time by the scratching of pens, the slitting of envelopes, and the blacking out of dangerous passages.

Then one of the censors, an Italian girl, with large, dark, lustrous eyes, olive complexion and a classic profile, left her seat.

She brought the D.A.C. a letter attached to a white paper, which she had been filling in with immense care.

Mrs. Johnson read through both documents and nodded approval.

"We'll see what they make of this in the code-room, Miss Napoli."

"Grazia."

The signorina had a way of letting fall from time to time words and phrases from her own language. Did she do this from mere accident or from affectation? No doubt on the subject was held by those who sat at the same long table during the regular hours of censoring.

Two or three years of each other's daily society left the censors with few illusions as to the mental and moral make-up of those about them.

The Italian gave a smirk of self-satisfaction as the letter was handed back for her to place in one of the baskets reserved for special collection.

"Scusate."

At the further foreign expression, Mrs. Johnson looked up with a certain cold politeness.

"What is it, Miss Napoli?"

"There are no more destruction-slips at our table and I shall be needing one for the next letter."

The opportunity was seized for the assertion of authority.

"If only one letter is opened at a time, the possibility of confusion is avoided. You must bear in mind that envelopes often contain something in addition to the actual letter itself."

The signorina half-closed her eyes, while she answered the D.A.C. in smooth, even tones.

"When I had everything prepared for bringing over to you, you were still engaged with Miss Loschka. While waiting for you to be free, I opened the next letter. The examination took only a very short time. It was simple to come to a decision. So much would require to be censored, that very little would remain for them to read at the other end of the journey."

"Very well, Miss Napoli. I quite understand. As soon as possible you shall have the required destruction slips."

There was a touch of irony in the reply, which Mrs. Johnson found it impossible to keep out of her voice.

"Good old Francesca!" sauced "Smiles" Brighten.

The English girl was so invariably cheerful, and had so much of the *gamin* about her that she was able to frivol with impunity. In no circumstances was a companion known to take offence at her pleasantries.

In reality Signorina Napoli's first name was Carmela, but "Francesca" had been substituted by her fellow-workers, while in almost the same breath the rôle of "Paulo" had been allotted to a singularly unprepossessing postal official who brought the mailbags to the room.

It was "Smiles" who was originally responsible

for the alleged discovery of the romance, to the supreme disgust of the aristocratic Italian. The "Paulo" thus provided for her so unoblingly was very much "of the people" !

Mrs. Johnson nodded the sorter to come over to her.

"Miss Marling, we require some blue slips. Will you please send down one of the scouts for a further supply?" The eyes of the D.A.C. travelled somewhat wearily in the direction of Carmela. "And in the meantime perhaps you could find one or two for Miss Napoli to be going on with."

Nesta returned to her own table and procured what was required. Then went into the passage to find a scout and give him the necessary instructions.

Miss Krajova, who had entered on her duties as a censor on the previous day, put a question to her neighbour who happened to be "Smiles". The surname Brighten had never been known to pass the lips of anyone besides the D.A.C.

"Excuse me, Miss — Smiles. May I interrupt you to ask a question? It is about Miss Marling. Does she hold some particular position in the room? She seems to have so many different duties."

"Marling is sorter. There is one for each room. She's the guy that deals out the pack. Distributes the mail."

Miss Krajova seemed attracted by the idea.

"That must be interesting."

"Smiles" shrugged indifference.

"It makes a change, I suppose. But there are disadvantages such as remaining to take charge of the room, when the rest go to lunch and going out

when the others remain. Not that Marling minds doing that, I imagine."

"Does she really like to have her meals alone?"

The question seemed to cause considerable amusement.

"There's a man up in the code-room who's keen on her. He seems able to fix his meals to suit her."

"No doubt Miss Marling likes the work of sorter. Is it not so?"

A slight negative movement of the head.

"Very probably she did at first. But after a time, it becomes so monotonous. Besides, it's a jolly strain on the memory. You must keep in your mind which censors deal with which language and what names and addresses are on the black list. At least if you can remember that sort of thing it saves a lot of time in the end. Then, too, various censors follow particular correspondence, and expect the sorter to keep it all at her finger tips. A bit unreasonable, but there you are."

"All that, however, cannot be very difficult."

"Not to the right person. But we're not all blessed with memories like hers. Marling has a damned fine one. That's why she's the right person for the job."

Marie considered a moment, then repeated the phrase she had used earlier.

"It must be very interesting to be sorter."

An edge of envy was introduced into her voice.

"Not to me." "Smiles" dismissed the notion rather contemptuously.

"But—to me!" was the persistent reply, followed by another question, after a slight pause. "Do you think Miss Marling would be annoyed, if I offered to help her?"

"I'm darned sure she wouldn't. She's fed up with the job. But there's no one else within a mile of her for that sort of efficiency. So there you are. She has to hang on, whether she likes it or not."

"And Miss Marling does not like it?" Marie pressed the point.

"Damned well not," was the prompt reply, "I should say anyone would get bored to the teeth. Oh, well, she's off for her leave next week, so she'll get a chance of forgetting for a time."

There was an almost perceptible raising of the pitch of Marie's voice, and an increase of emphasis, as she questioned further.

"And what will happen then?"

"Smiles" was becoming bored with the subject, and showed the fact by her careless reply.

"Oh, someone will have to carry on in her place."

Nesta returned to the room at that moment. Mademoiselle Krajova glanced at her, then addressed herself to "Smiles" once more.

"I am supposed to have a fairly good memory."

"Then why don't you ask for the understudy? You'd be saving somebody a lot of trouble, that's certain. Take my tip, though, have a try at it first. Offer to lend a hand when there's a rush on. That's the time to choose. Do you get me? Marling will be as pleased as punch, if you do."

Marie considered the position, then asked with an air of simplicity.

"You think it would not appear—how shall I say it?—that I was trying to bring myself under the notice of the authorities?"

"I should smile."

And she did.

The whispered conversation was broken off at this point, and the two of them concentrated on the letters allotted to them.

For some time there was complete quiet in the room. Then, one by one, the censors began to drop off from their work, as the lessening pile of correspondence before them became exhausted.

The door opened and all eyes turned in that direction. An official brought in several postbags which bulged with their contents.

Nesta approached her task with a hint of soul weariness for the mail was heavy.

The work of selection and distribution began since evidently quite a number of the censors were waiting for a new supply to reach them.

Mrs. Johnson viewed the situation with a slight frown and her eye wandered selectively round the room.

"Now's your chance," nudged "Smiles".

Marie went over to the wooden trestle-table, where Nesta was preparing the largest postbag to disgorge its contents.

"May I be permitted to help you, Miss Marling? Until some further work has been given to me, I have no duties."

The primly proper English of the foreigner provoked a faint smile.

"Thank you, Miss Krajova, for offering your assistance. Do you know what has to be done, when one is acting as sorter?"

"I could learn, could I not? I would try not to be too stupid."

Nesta nodded approval.

"I'm sure of that. Let me explain the system

by which the mail is distributed. The main points are these."

Nesta proceeded to deliver an improvised lecture on the subject and while doing so, she dealt with a pile of correspondence at lightning speed.

Marie listened to everything with attention, and asked some penetrating questions from time to time. About a quarter of an hour later the postbags had been emptied and all the censors were hard at work.

"You've picked up the scheme wonderfully well, Miss Krajova. I hope you will be kind enough to help me some other time when the mail is heavy."

"I shall only be too glad to do what I can to assist you, Miss Marling. The work is fascinating. At least, so it appears to me."

"Evidently you have all the necessary qualifications. I thought my memory was fairly good, but yours——"

The sentence was left unfinished. The highest compliment that could have been offered in the circumstances.

"In a few days I shall be taking some of the leave due to me," Nesta continued. "You see, last summer I worked without a break and remained hard at it all through Christmas as well. If only you were able to carry on while I was away, it would be a perfect Godsend to the room. May I suggest it to Mrs. Johnson?"

A sorter. The distribution of letters under her own control.

Marie's eyes narrowed as she heard Nesta's proposal. So this was the opportunity Paul Morris must have had in mind when he asked Varaski for a linguist to assist him in England.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WOMAN WHO WAITED

A WEEK had passed since the explosion in Piccadilly by which the driver of the G.P.O. van had met his death.

After that event Loschka had daily expected to hear from Paul Morris. To her increasing surprise, however, no communication whatsoever reached her.

The explanation of the continued silence she could surmise only too well.

If she had been successful in reaching her objective with the bomb some sign of approval would have been received within a very few hours, no matter what personal risk might have been involved. Morris, or those whom he represented, always gave good and prompt reward for actual achievement.

But she had failed. In doing so, had committed an unforgivable sin and because of that, Morris was evidently not prepared to take unnecessary risks.

If some clue had been discovered by any chance she would be under the eye of the authorities, and it might be dangerous for him to associate with her at such a time. Therefore he must have decided to avoid her entirely. This certainly appeared to be the reason for his present course of action.

Or rather, of inaction—masterly inactivity as it might be described.

Yet was it fair of him to ascribe the failure of the project to her neglect? Surely it had been her misfortune rather than her fault?

What were the facts?

Had it not been definitely settled from the very outset that the bomb should be controlled by a double mechanism? It was to explode either on being opened or at a particular time, whichever event came first.

Paul Morris had been in hearty agreement with this proposal. After all was she not a supreme specialist in her own particular line, as her father had once been, and his father before him? She had been born to the purple, a proud descendant of those whose names had been shining lights of encouragement to the Nihilists of their time.

The details of the proposed attempt had been thought out with the utmost care.

Under normal conditions the parcel containing the bomb would have arrived at Lord Martingdon's house on the morning of his birthday. Probably on so festive an occasion the package would have been opened at once, quite without suspicion. The death of all within a certain radius would have been the immediate outcome.

If, however, for any reason the infernal machine had been put aside for being opened later, then the clock apparatus had been fixed so as to set the mechanism in motion at midday.

At that hour Lord Martingdon was always in his writing-room, either in consultation with persons of high importance or in the clutch of his secretaries.

In either event the violence of the explosion acting

in a circumscribed space would have wrecked the building and brought disaster on the occupants.

Loschka had been well aware that no air-offensive was planned against London for the night following the actual postage of the death-dealing parcel. She had certain reliable sources on which to draw for such information.

As it happened, however, one of the British aeroplanes through some misapprehension had made its appearance over the Thames estuary, without conforming to the signalling regulations.

"An enemy aircraft has been sighted."

"Probably the advance guard of an attack in force."

This was the news that had come through. And the result? A false alarm leading to the issue of a general warning; the calling out of the Special Constabulary; the pomp and circumstance of the anti-aircraft units; intensive precautions against the outbreak of fire; the transfer of hospital patients from upper floors to basements; and all the rest of the life and property saving paraphernalia, including the overwhelming popularity of underground railways and the disturbance of the ordinary postal routine of the metropolis.

And the aftermath?

The explosion of a bomb next morning in a public thoroughfare instead of within Clansdon House, and the death of a postal official who held a position of comparative obscurity, while a certain prominent member of the peerage remained very much alive.

"And here am I blamed for all this," Loschka complained to herself.

Paul Morris did not comprehend the true position,

that was evident, but he should be made to do so. On that point she was fully determined.

This was the regular day of the month on which they were accustomed to meet after she had finished her duties at the Censor's. They always spent the evening together at the same place, "Le Bon Viver", a small eating-house, insignificant, little frequented, named with a fine sense of irony.

A *chambre séparée* was available for any of the customers—and no questions asked. After a meal of sorts had been served, they were left undisturbed. If they rang a waiter would knock, and never entered before receiving express instructions to do so. The management anticipated the worst from their clientele, and were rarely disappointed.

As far as Loschka and Morris were concerned, however, the *solitude à deux* was utilized for strictly business purposes. A heart-to-heart talk as between spy and spy. On these occasions it was her first duty to make a full report of her movements and of the work on which she had been engaged. Afterwards she received her four weeks' pay, together with any additional emolument due for expenses or special results. Finally the future arrangements were discussed.

Then and only then was the waiter summoned to receive an order for two absinthes. As ending to the evening came the parting of ways until a further month should have passed.

On the present occasion Loschka encountered a change from the usual procedure on arriving at the restaurant.

"The usual room?" she asked with a friendly nod to the manager.

The question was a mere matter of form and she prepared to mount the staircase without waiting for the routine response.

"Then you desire the room for this evening?"

She turned and stared at the man in surprise.

"But of course."

He shrugged.

"Always before to-day Monsieur has telephoned to me in the morning to give the order. But this time he has not done so."

She frowned.

"Hasn't it been our custom to meet each other on this day?"

He gave silent agreement, apology in his face.

"Has the room been—countermanded?"

"*Non, non.* But no order was given. That is all I say."

Loschka assumed an air of self-confidence which she was far from feeling.

"Monsieur was too busy to inform you of his wishes."

With an ingratiating smile he waved her towards the staircase.

"I reserve the room as before. But of course. Will Mademoiselle ascend? I shall send up something while she wait? Yes? The same as always."

Half an hour the Russian sat alone in room number II. An hour passed while she remained waiting, waiting. But Morris did not arrive. At last came a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of the proprietor, all concern. The other had been a good customer in the past.

"Can I not help Mademoiselle in some way?"

Loschka despondently shook her head.

"Will not Mademoiselle eat something, since Monsieur has been detained?"

"No," her voice sounded distrait.

"Does Mademoiselle think perhaps that Monsieur has met with an accident?"

"It may be so."

But in her mind she was convinced that he had kept away because of his unwillingness to take any risks in communicating with her.

"Mademoiselle knows we have a telephone-box on the *entresol* for the use of customers." The proprietor gave her a meaning glance, then added in a significant tone: "It is altogether private. Well understood. When our clients hold conversation, they do not always wish they should be heard—or even seen by others."

With the hint thus carefully conveyed, she saw in a flash that this was a solution of the difficulty. Possibly the very step which Morris had been waiting for her to take.

Then a probable explanation came to her of what had happened when last she spoke to him over the telephone. At the time she had done so Morris might not have been alone in his rooms. That being the case, he was in a position to listen to all she had to say, while no one else had any idea what message he was receiving. But if he had given the code reply, that would inevitably have been audible to anyone present.

Yes, she would telephone once again. Had not Morris instructed her invariably to do so in case of emergency?

She would then be able to ascertain by what new method he wished their communications to take

place. Afterwards future arrangements could be settled.

Besides, was not her salary due? It by no means suited her to leave this over at the present time.

As she entered the telephone-box, she noted the door was of solid wood, instead of having the usual glass panels through which the interior was visible to any passer-by.

Evidently clients of the restaurant would be safe from prying eyes while using the instrument. As she closed the door behind her, the electric light came on.

The operator at the exchange was not long in connecting her with the number for which she had asked. It was a private one which did not figure in the directory.

"Hullo!—Hullo! Hullo!"

After Loschka had repeated the agreed call some two or three times, she was answered in those tones with whose peculiarities she was so well acquainted. Evidently, then, Morris was at his rooms.

"Hullo! Hullo!—Hullo!" came the settled reply with the reversed grouping. So far all was well.

"One nought one speaking."

The cipher used was her censor number, and having given the code opening she waited for the code answer: "Three one five replying,"—the number of the house in Jermyn Street.

Morris himself had thought out this as a safeguard. No one, so he argued, was likely to hit on such an arrangement. On this occasion, as on the last, Loschka waited in vain for the proper response.

She spoke into the telephone a second time.

"This is one nought one."

Having done so, she was conscious of a slight hesitation at the other end of the wire. Then the voice, which she imagined to be Morris, was again audible.

"It has been decided to alter the code. The other has become too risky. I was waiting for an opportunity to inform you."

Waiting for it? Yet he had not kept the restaurant appointment? How could that be? The eyes of the Russian narrowed suspiciously. Nevertheless, as yet she had not the slightest inkling of the truth. She waited in breathless silence.

Eventually after a lengthy pause, the same voice began addressing her again.

"Hullo! Hullo!—Hullo! Can't you hear me?"

"Certainly I can," she answered with caution. "But you must excuse me for pointing out a mistake which you have made."

"What is that?" came the swift question. A note of uneasiness seemed to have entered the voice.

"Surely I do not need to remind you that before a code is changed it is necessary for the former to be completed. Otherwise it would be easy for some unscrupulous person to deceive others with success."

"Hardly possible?" The voice sounded incredulous.

"It could be arranged very simply. Therefore I will repeat the code opening once again and ask you to complete it. 'One nought one speaking'."

"Have I not told you an alteration has been made?" was the expostulation.

"Very well," her expression became hard. "I understand perfectly why you do not reply. You cannot do so. Some trick is being played. I know now that you are not—" the word must not pass

her lips for fear it should implicate her in some way. She must be wary. "You are not the person whom you pretend to be."

What had been going on she did not know, but she meant to find out as soon as possible.

Meanwhile she would be safest out of the way. She clearly saw the necessity of leaving at once.

Loschka replaced the receiver with a threat in her face that boded ill for the man who had been trying to trick her, whoever he might be.

Closing the door of the telephone-box softly behind her, she hurried out of the restaurant. Once she looked back and once only, to see whether her departure had been noted.

Then her eyes wandered mistrustingly up and down the road, before she made off by way of a narrow side turning and after going a few yards stepped into the shelter of an arch. Satisfied at last that no one was trailing her, the Slav set off in the direction of her lodgings.

Five minutes after she had gone from the premises, the telephone began to sound.

"Is that the Bon Viveur Restaurant? You are wanted," warned the operator from the exchange.

Then a man's voice came over the wire. It resembled that of the client who had been in the regular habit of reserving the *chambre séparée* once a month.

"That is right, Monsieur. It was from here that Mademoiselle telephoned," the proprietor replied to the question just put to him, "she waited for you more than an hour."

He ceased, listened, then spoke again.

"Mademoiselle has already left the restaurant. Where has she gone? That I cannot tell you."

His face brightened.

"You will have supper here in a quarter of an hour? *Bien, Monsieur.*"

In Morris's sitting-room Alderson gently replaced the receiver.

"Diamond Cut Diamond with a vengeance," he muttered with a grin of anticipation.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUSPICION

"You won't lunch with me? Why not?" The lines of Barwell's face dropped with disappointment. He had just met Nesta Marling on a staircase landing at the Censor's.

"Because—well, because to-day I am not going out for a meal."

After replying she looked away, as though wishing to avoid his gaze.

There was no answer, when he said:

"Something's up, isn't it?"

After a pause, he continued:

"Won't you tell me? You must. I—I can't stand seeing you like this—Nesta."

It was many months since he had ceased calling her Miss Marling. This was the first time, however, that he had used her christian name.

On hearing it she raised her eyes.

"I have a headache."

"That's not all. Don't you think I know you better? There-is-something. You can't deceive me." His tone became reproachful. "Don't you trust me? Is that it?"

She gently shook her head.

"Nesta," he pleaded. "I can't stand this. I—I'm not half good enough. I realize that. But—" he went on impulsively. "You must know how much I care. Nesta, dear—will you——"

The question was in his eyes.

"But you know hardly anything about me. Who I am, and such things."

"I know—what you are. That's enough for me."

"Who my people are," she went on, mischievously concealing the truth.

Nevertheless there was some quality in her voice which could not easily be mistaken and at the sound his heart grew light. The subsequent trend of conversation suggested that his head had been similarly affected.

"We regret that we are not prepared to marry your people, but would like to thank you for the kind opportunity you have given us. We beg to remain yours faithfully. Sign in triplicate along the dotted line."

A smile rippled on her lips.

"Then you don't mind if we're Marling's Marmalade? Or—keep a general stores at Mudville on the Marsh?"

I don't care if your father keeps a pub at Paddington."

"It would be handy for—Lords," she murmured with a cryptic humour that was lost on him.

"Or if he sells ale at Aylesbury," he continued madly. "Or port at Portsmouth."

"Or—Orpens at Orpington?" she put in; with a twinkle of private amusement. As it happened some family portraits by Sir William Orpen hung on the walls of Effington House, near Orpington, where her father had a country estate.

"I don't care about anything at all," he retorted, oblivious to the hint, "if only you will say yes."

"To what? No!" she put out a hand to restrain

him. "I don't want you to tell me. In any case a public staircase is hardly the most suitable place for giving a—a satisfactory answer to—well, to——"

"The question I intend to ask?"

She feigned to be taken aback.

"Intend? Of course, if it's like that—cave man—and absolutely nothing will stop you——"

She allowed him to look into the depths of her eyes.

"Nesta."

The tip-tap of approaching footsteps, and he returned to his first question.

"Won't you come to lunch? You simply must—now."

But she was very decided in her answer.

"I can't, there is a particular reason why I am unable to go out to-day."

He pouted like a spoiled child.

"What rotten luck. But why on earth can't you come? It's not as though you were tied up any longer by that job of sorter. When you came back from your holiday two months ago you told me some tremendously brainy person had understudied you while you were away, and had offered to take over the position altogether. You were as pleased as anything about it and said you had accepted."

"I was delighted at the time. But now——" A worried look came back. She made an abrupt halt in what she had been about to say.

A boy scout passed on his way to fetch further supplies for one of the rooms.

"It strikes me," Barwell protested.

"Never mind about that," she interposed. "If only you will wait till this evening, I'll explain. I

wouldn't have done so on any consideration, only—of course, everything is different—now!”

He looked puzzled at her words.

“You sound most mysterious.”

With an expressive movement, Nesta indicated the publicity of their surroundings.

“Can't you be patient just for a few hours? I'll tell you what we'll arrange. When we've finished work for the day, you shall take me out for a meal somewhere, and afterwards to one of the musical shows.”

“To celebrate?” he questioned, putting his fate to the ultimate test of words.

“Very well, then, ‘to celebrate’, if you like to call it that. But mind, it's to be fifty-fifty as usual.”

“Oh, no,” came the instant objection, and he quoted her own phrase against her. “Of course, everything is different now.”

“As you wish—cave man.”

He pursued the subject still further.

“Where would you like to go?”

“When in doubt, lead Chu Chin,” she suggested.

“Then Chow it shall be. I'll ring up for seats, while we're out at lunch.”

“While *you're* out,” she corrected.

“You mean it then?” hoping desperately that she would waver.

“Absolutely.” She remained adamant.

Then gave a little laugh.

“And after the show, you shall see me home and be introduced to—Marling's Marmalade. So be prepared for a shock.”

Having uttered the warning, she returned to Room D 14 to resume her duties as censor.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Johnson, for being away so long, but—I was unavoidably detained. However, I shall not be going out to-day."

As she said this, she looked cautiously in the direction of Marie Krajova.

It was some hours later that Nesta administered the shock for which Barwell was totally unprepared, in spite of her warning.

The curtain at His Majesty's had descended for the very last time, on the last scene of the last act, and the crowd streamed out through the various exits.

After some "alarums and excursions" the young couple emerged safely in the Haymarket.

"I'm glad, dear, that you've behaved in a proper spirit over the various——"

"Extravagances?" Nesta suggested.

"Arrangements," the cave man corrected. "As a reward you shall be allowed to pay for the taxi—if it's not more than half a crown."

She laughed with soft enjoyment of what was to come.

"'Nobody wants one, sir,' she said,

'Sir,' she said,

'Sir,' she said,

'We're going to walk there, sir,' she said."

He began to raise humorous objection.

"If you're going to be Scotch, I'll pay the half-crown myself. Instead of Marling's Marmalade, I believe the skeleton in your cupboard is Dundee Shortbread."

"What an appalling mixture of metaphors," she chaffed.

He assumed intense solemnity.

"There's something fishy about it, anyway. Perhaps it is Marlings's Caller Herrin."

"It's all very well to call me Scotch. What am I to call you in return, when you talk about paying a taxi half a crown for taking us a hundred yards."

"How do you mean—a hundred yards?" Barwell asked. He looked vaguely along Pall Mall, whereat she seemed mightily amused.

"I'm not the daughter of the hall porter at one of the clubs. Try straight ahead," she hinted. "There is no need to proceed sideways, like a crab."

He turned an inquiring gaze on her, then followed her across the Mall, and on past the central Statue, pausing at last where the Duke of York's column was perched above the steps leading down to the park.

The moon came out and bathed the scene in silver.

"But—I don't understand," he stammered. "Isn't this Carlton House Terrace? Look here, old thing, don't——"

"Pull your leg?" she suggested.

"I—I've never before heard you use slang. It sounds awfully—queer—from you."

A heavy stress was laid on the concluding word, whereat she drew herself up with an assumption of offended dignity, while a little imp of mischief peeped out of her eyes, in spite of her attempt at repression.

"I'm sorry you consider my behaviour unbecoming," Lady Nesta Marling paused for the right work, and the aforesaid imp supplied it with commendable promptness "unbecoming to—a lady."

"You know perfectly well no such thought entered my mind," he vehemently protested. "It was merely that—it was so unlike you."

Their hands met, while the Duke of York aloft looked tactfully away, and a cloud cloaked the face of the moon.

"Ah, but to-night is quite unlike any other," she whispered, then drew away, while the moon peeped down once more.

As they stood looking out over St. James's Park to that far beyond visible only to the eye of the imagination, the poetry of the moment welled up from within.

" 'The moon shines bright'," she quoted softly. " 'In such a night as this'."

He, too, was a lover of the greatest poet of them all, and took up the lines:

"When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,
And they did make no noise—in such a night,
Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls,
And sighed his soul towards the Grecian tents,
Where Cressida lay that night."

Her voice sank to a note so soft, that she was scarcely audible, when she recalled another passage of the scene:

"In such a night
Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well,
Stealing her soul with many vows of faith,
And each——"

But he would not let her repeat Jessica's words. Instead he substituted a variation of his own:

"And each—a true one."

There was a throb in his voice that stirred her strangely. She closed her eyes.

In another moment she felt his arms about her.

"Oh, my dear."

Their lips met, while she held her breath in sudden ecstasy.

A happy sigh, and then:

"Sweet soul, let's in."

By the hand, she led him towards her home.

As in a dream, he saw her pause at one of the largest mansions in Carlton House Terrace, and place her finger to the electric bell.

"As a matter of fact, I've a latchkey," she explained. "But this is rather an occasion, and I want to—to swank."

Another piece of slang. Love certainly seemed to be having a strangely disintegrating effect on her polite vocabulary.

"But—" Barwell stared at the number on the door above the massive knocker; an Italian antique.

"But what?" she questioned, in a voice of innocence which did not ring wholly true.

"Isn't this Lord Effington's place?"

"You've said it," she responded.

Really the change in Lady Nesta approached the incredible.

"I'm the second housemaid," she added, lying without a blush. "Didn't I warn you that you were in for a shock?"

The great double doors were thrown open by a smart parlourmaid, for the butler and footmen of pre-war days were no more than an unsubstantial memory.

"Have you put out some supper for us, Perkins," an absurd idea came into her mind and she did not spurn it, "in the servants' hall?"

Her eyes danced joyously. For a moment the maid was taken aback, then quickly sensed the situation.

"I thought, your ladyship, that the morning-room would be more comfortable."

"Would you let my father know?"

"Very good, Lady Nesta. His lordship asked me to say he was waiting in the library."

"Thank you, Perkins. In that case you need not give the message."

A gesture of dismissal.

Lady Nesta Marling and Mr. John Barwell were alone in the hall.

He presented such a picture of pitiable bewilderment, that at last Nesta was unable to restrain her laughter any longer.

"Cheer up, or I shall begin to think you would have preferred Marling's Marmalade—or the general stores at Mudville."

"It's so overwhelming, somehow."

"If you're feeling like that, come along to the library and overwhelm daddy, while you're in the right mood."

Half an hour later the interview with Lord Effington had passed off without causing any appreciable loss of appetite for the supper *à deux* which followed.

And so to cigarettes.

Five minutes of delicious fooling, then a look of seriousness came into Nesta's face.

"And now, I'll tell you what was the matter this morning. I want your advice very badly. The fact is I'm terribly worried about one of the censors in our room, the new sorter."

CHAPTER XIX

A QUESTION ANSWERED

MORNING, an unusually heavy correspondence, and dozens of censors hard at work at the long tables.

Mrs. Johnson looked round the room with some anxiety.

"Miss Krajova, I think you had better order some more supplies to be brought. We're getting short of nearly everything. If you see no boy scout, it would probably save time to go down and fetch them yourself, as you've finished distributing the incoming mail."

Marie rose in silence and glided noiselessly from the room.

Nesta paused in her work of ironing a document which she had been testing, and there was a slight wrinkling in her forehead as she watched the departure. Then returning to the task in hand, she held the suspect letter to the light.

It was the day after the ship of her romance had come into harbour, and at such a time she found it hard to concentrate on her duties. Besides, there was something else to hold her attention, the matter which she had discussed with her fiancé after supper on the previous evening. The conclusion they had reached was difficult to keep out of the mind.

"Any result, Miss Marling?" questioned Mrs. Johnson.

"I am rather afraid there is nothing at all."

"Are you sure?" the D.A.C. persisted.

"There's no sign of any secret message. At least none as yet."

Nesta looked thoughtful, then went on: "It's rather strange because I had a strong instinct there was some invisible writing somewhere. Just as there was that other time, a few months ago, in the 'You Know Case'."

This was how everyone in the room referred to the Morris affair, whose mention by name had been forbidden.

"Let me have a look."

As the head of the room spoke, she held out her hand for the paper. "I've very rarely known you to be mistaken when you've felt things before."

A careful examination followed, with the aid of a magnifying-glass, then the verdict:

"Nothing."

There was a certain definiteness about the inflection.

"I suppose," Mrs. Johnson went on, "it will have to be passed, unless," she eyed the girl rather oddly, "unless you care to try the 'forlorn hope' again."

"I don't think he's very forlorn. On the contrary." Nesta coloured slightly, with the realization that her tongue had gone beyond her intention.

"So, it's like that, is it?" Instinct directed the questioner's eyes to the third finger on the left hand, but there was no engagement ring.

"It only happened last night," was the whispered explanation.

"It was all rather unexpected, and with his usual well-known devotion to duty, he is spending the morning in the code-room instead of in a jeweller's shop."

"Unexpected?" The older woman quizzed with a smile of superior experience "Not to me, my dear."

Nesta decided to put the position more clearly.

"I only meant 'in a way'. Because—well, don't you see, in the circumstances, I had to play fairly."

An understanding glance passed between the two. The head of the room was in the confidence of her official subordinate, who was her social superior. The exigencies and patriotic sacrifices of the War had brought into existence many strange anomalies.

"About the address—and so on?"

The question was artfully put in case any of the censors should chance to overhear. Lady Nesta Marling had impressed on Mrs. Johnson that the secret was to be preserved so long as she remained in the office.

"It wouldn't have been right to deceive—Mr. Barwell—any longer. Things had reached the point where he had to know everything. Besides, I wanted to give daddy an opportunity of seeing things from the right angle."

"Meaning—from your own?"

The suspicion of a shrug.

"Why not? After all, that's the only real concern. As—John—very wisely remarked, he was not intending to ask the entire family to marry him—only one of them. At the time, I may tell you, I had been hinting at the skeleton in our cupboard being a General Stores."

"Whereas, instead of a General, it was a——"

"Hush," Nesta warned. "Granted that War marriages are a case of 'mind your own business' to all concerned, or to all who think themselves

concerned, the War won't last for ever. Preliminary approval between future in-laws will make things easier in the long run."

Mrs. Johnson nodded emphatic agreement.

"So you bore your capture home in triumph—after His Majesty's."

"Then you saw us there?"

A sly smile.

"And subsequently. Imagining apparently that Pall Mall was the middle of Sahara with not a soul in sight."

The truth of the situation dawned at last.

"When you called him 'the forlorn hope', you did so deliberately?"

"With malice aforethought," the other amplified, "as my barrister brother would call it."

"In fact," Nesta laughed, "you were simply pulling my leg. These times seem to be demoralizing."

"So much so, that you are trying to turn this place into a *conversazione*."

"I think there are extenuating circumstances," was the pleading, half-humorous response, after which they resumed their official position. "Then I am to send the letter up to the code-room."

Nesta went back to her seat.

As there seemed nothing which demanded attention for the time being, Mrs. Johnson set out on one of her "missionary journeys", as the staff called them. She passed with all due solemnity from table to table, questioning here, making suggestions there, seeing that everyone was "carrying on" along the proper lines.

She came to a halt beside Mme. Leblanc, who

was apparently day-dreaming, and, satisfied that she had roused the Frenchwoman from her stupor, passed on to another table at the far end of the room. Meanwhile, the interlude had attracted the attention of those near Mme. Leblanc's place.

For their express amusement she began to read a letter aloud, in a tone which could be heard by those around her, without penetrating to the vicinity of the D.A.C.

After a single glance her face became all indignation.

"Oh—! Oh—! The Doings of Alfonse!"

"Is that a new novel," asked her neighbour, "Smiles".

"*Jamais de la vie*," came the protest. "It is a true story from the chef of 'Le Bon Viver'. Our own restaurant. What do you think of that?"

A slight flicker of Loschka's eyelid at the mention of the name was observed by Mme. Leblanc.

"You know it. Yes?"

The Russian turned her eyes slowly on the Frenchwoman.

"A friend of mine has praised the food. Some day I myself will go there!"

Mme. Leblanc leaned across the table to give a confidential hint.

"Go quickly, my friend, if you want your food prepared by the same chef, because—*voyons, ma petite*—time is short. Verray short. He will leave our restaurant *toute suite*, piff, paff, pouf."

Her eyes devoured the contents. "He recounts to his brother Jacques all his doings on."

"Goings on," corrected "Smiles",

"Doings and goings," was Madame's judgment. "He shall be going to-morrow, and what he shall be doing afterwards—*ma foi, ça m'est égal.*"

Page after page was read through, to the accompaniment of infuriated ejaculations.

"*Mais non—pas possible— Oh!—oh!—*" words failed at last. Then came an idea. The stamp used for blacking out was seized upon, and brought down here, there, everywhere, till the whole of the letter was rendered illegible. Into the envelope it was bundled, and the censor label stuck on with a truculent bang that made the table shake.

"Look out, Francesca," "Misery" Minton warned, with assumed anxiety. "A further eruption of Vesuvius may be expected shortly. Preliminary seismic tremors have already been observed."

Signorina Napoli offered Leblanc supercilious congratulations.

"Not only does Madame censor like the lightning, but she provides the thunder."

One o'clock was heard to strike.

"*Mon Dieu! Enfin!*" ejaculated Madame Leblanc, jumping up from her chair with a briskness that would have seemed strangely alien to her nature to anyone who might only be acquainted with her during hours of work.

"Are you not coming, Miss Marling?" Napoli questioned, as she waited by the door.

"I can't leave yet."

"Someone will be disappointed if you delay too long."

The remark was ignored.

"*Ebbene.*"

The signorina flounced out of the room. Soon after her departure, Nesta came over to Mrs. Johnson, said something in a low voice, and went back to her place.

Whereon the D.A.C. looked over to Marie.

"Miss Krajova, there will be no need for you to wait. You can go for lunch with the others. I have a good deal requiring attention, and shall be remaining here till your return."

With slow composure Marie made her preparations for going out, wondering in her mind why there should be this change from ordinary routine.

At last Mrs. Johnson and Nesta found themselves alone.

"And now, Miss Marling, what did you wish to discuss with me in private?"

The girl's brows contracted.

"I am anxious to be transferred to another room, please, as soon as possible." The request was unusual and totally unexpected.

"But—for what reason?"

"I'd rather not explain," was the reluctant response.

But Mrs. Johnson was persistent.

"If I am to help you, I am afraid you must."

With that, she looked keenly at the girl.

"What is worrying you?"

"That wretched instinct of mine. It has made me notice things without intending to do so."

"Irregularities?"

"I'd prefer not to say. But do please arrange for me to be moved at once."

Mrs. Johnson began to realize where all this was leading.

"Then it is something worse than irregularities. I understand. And you are in a hurry to get away from it."

"I hate myself for suspecting one of my own colleagues. I have no right to do such a thing."

The head of the room studied the ceiling for some time.

"Once or twice I have myself been wondering. They were only little occurrences. There might have been some simple explanation. But I never quite liked to ask." She became slightly flustered. "This is absolutely in confidence. Quite between ourselves."

A movement of Nesta's hands implied acquiescence.

"If you have noticed things as well," the other continued, coming to a swift decision, "that makes the position rather different. Miss Marling, it is my desire that you should remain."

Nesta gave a start, guessing something was to follow.

"You are suspicious of treachery. So am I. From now onwards, please follow your instinct, no matter where it may lead you."

The girl's eyes widened.

"Is that official? It might end in—something very serious indeed."

Mrs. Johnson drew herself up with dignity.

"I realize fully the possibilities. You must try to obtain something definite, such as documentary evidence. You have my full authority to take whatever steps you may consider necessary."

CHAPTER XX

RUMOURS

EXCITING times had begun for the staff of censors. If warnings were issued by the heads at least once a week, a new rumour made its appearance certainly once a day, while the rank and file compared notes almost hourly.

Imagination touched drab experiences with a magic wand, and promptly they became arrayed in a coat of many colours which provided a camouflage so effective as to render them quite unrecognizable for what in reality they were.

Imposing edifices were raised on the flimsiest foundations, only to topple over at the first gentle breath of fact.

For these unsubstantial structures no one was more responsible than Kitty Barton. If the girl came away from an intimate *tête-à-tête* dinner, with a long skein of narrative gathered up into a neat ball, within half an hour she would have unwound it again and tied herself up in an utterly unbelievable tangle.

When the evidence offered in support of any of her statements became a Gordian knot, she never attempted to cut it, much less to straighten it out. Instead, she merely walked off and left her tale behind her, like the fabled sheep of Little Bo-peep.

Possessed of sex-appeal, she nevertheless remained heart-whole and managed countless affairs with no inconsiderable discretion.

In fact, she was bright and attractive, cheery and sympathetic, in much request to play with soldiers, sailors, airmen, brass-hats, tin-hats, and even felt-hats. With regard to the last, however, she insisted that they must be worn by good-looking members of the home brigade, who held some official position enabling them to retail interesting tit-bits of information for her particular benefit.

There was a *modus operandi* applied by her to most occasions. She would hint that she was at the Censor's. "But don't breathe a word to a soul. You see, we're not supposed to let anyone know. Only, of course," here she would flash an admiring glance, "you will probably already have been told."

"Quite." Even if it was not quite. "There's no harm in handing on this bit of news," he would murmur confidently in return. "You're sure to hear all about it anyhow. Shouldn't be surprised if you knew before I did."

"Kitten", as the others called her, arrived late at the Censor's on this particular morning. But no reprimand was forthcoming. As it happened, permission had been obtained in advance.

"Have you seen your brother off safely?" Mrs. Johnson inquired in a tone of interest, looking up from her work.

"Yes, thank you."

An innocent smile accompanied the reply and the girl went over to her place.

As a matter of cold, calm fact, she had been keeping a date with a subaltern, Jimmy Blankson, prior to his return to the Front. During his leave, he had been particularly persistent in his attentions—and intentions, and she had promised faithfully to

be at the station to see him off on this last morning.

Being a person of her word, "Kitten" had taken the precaution of obtaining Mrs. Johnson's preliminary sanction for coming late. The reference to a brother put forward by her in making the request for leave of absence was not "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth", but it had a ring of truth, and that was something to go on with.

"Doesn't one of those poet fellows gas about 'these glorious few, this band of brothers'?" she explained to a fellow-censor. "When I referred to Jimmy as a brother, I meant the word in that sense."

Having taken her seat "Kitten" nodded an affable greeting to the rest at the table, then opened her "bag of tools for running repairs" and produced the lipstick together with the rest of the tackle.

Last of all, she unlocked her personal drawer and extracted a bundle of labels bearing her censoring number. Following these, she brought out several uncensored letters, which had been hurriedly thrust away on the previous evening with a view to getting off on the stroke of time, to doll herself up for the subaltern's final frolic.

"I never seem able to catch up with my work," she lamented, while slitting open one of the envelopes.

"I never seem able to catch up with your brothers," "Misery" observed, by way of retort.

"Smiles" interposed a question.

"Where did you dig up this one?"

"Kitten" made a face and administered a kick under the table. Whereat there was an "ouch" and a mighty ankle-rubbing.

"Oh, shut up, both of you," she snapped. "Or I shan't tell you something I heard last night."

"Another of your yarns?"

The question sounded rather contemptuous, and forthwith "Kitten" shut up like an oyster, hiding the pearl upon her tongue. They should be paid out.

For ten minutes not once did her eyes leave the letters, which she was supposed to be censoring. Never, since she had joined the staff, had she been so wholly devoted to duty.

The head of the room during one of her "missionary journeys" paused a moment to wonder at the sight. "Kitten" Barton was quite satisfactory as a worker, otherwise she would not have been allowed to remain on the staff, but it was new to see her attacking the correspondence with such gusto and concentration. Giving a slight expression of approval, Mrs. Johnson proceeded on her voyage.

As soon as her back was turned, "Kitten" seized the opportunity to "make a face" at her companions, and then turned to work once more.

Questions and pointed remarks were addressed to her in vain, since all of them were utterly ignored.

When the new mail arrived, "Kitten" relented. The general commotion of distribution gave her the chance of letting them into the secret of the new rumour recounted to her on the previous evening. It had come from the aforesaid lips of Jimmy Blankson, whose family tree had spread ramifications in the most unexpected places. Knowing her official position he had not hesitated to hand on the story.

"All of you have heard about Dr. Jekyll and

Mr. Hyde," "Kitten" began. "You've read about them in a book or heard them at a theatre or gazed rapturously at them in a movie."

"Doctorr Jekyll and Meester Hyde?" Loschka questioned, her face a blank.

"Not you," "Kitten" explained. "I meant the others. You only know about—help me, 'Misery', who were the great Russian novelists?"

"Among the men the most famous were Tolstoy and—Drosky."

A great humanitarian and a four-wheeled carriage, Misery coupled them together with imperturbable gravity, wondering how many would realize the jest.

Not "Kitten" for one. On hearing the two names she brightened at once.

"Oh, yes, I've heard a lot about Drosky, although I've never read anything of his. What name was best-known among the women writers?"

It was Francesca who seized on the opportunity this time.

"Vodka was the favourite. Would you not say so, Miss Loschka?"

The Slav turned two sad eyes on the speaker.

"My father died because of Vodka."

Ignorant that the two foreigners were referring to the national drink, "Kitten" totally misunderstood the allusion.

"How romantic. Where was I? Oh, yes. About Jekyll and Hyde. Well, Jimmy swore that in London at this very moment a rather similar case was going on and it had to do with the censors. Someone was being two people at once."

"Dual personality," Signorina Napoli commented with her customary air of superiority.

"Oh, no, Francesca," "Kitten" promptly retorted. "It's nothing like that. Some man has been turning into another. And the extraordinary part of the affair is that no one has guessed. Everyone goes on thinking it's still the other man."

Loschka stared, swallowed, and moistened her lips, but, as it happened, no one noticed her behaviour.

Just then Marie Krajova was distributing the mail at that end of the table, and the conversation reached her ears. As a result of allowing her attention to stray, she dropped a packet of letters. By the time that they had been gathered up from the floor, Loschka had recovered complete control, but though outwardly calm, she remained inwardly agitated.

What was it that she had just been hearing?

One man had become another, and no one had guessed! Could that be the explanation of the strange events which lately had been happening to her? She must think hard. No, she must wait till later to come to a decision.

For the present she must pretend to be busy with her censoring, while her ears remained on the alert to hear further details.

Marie Krajova handed "Kitten" a substantial collection of letters with an air of assumed concern and a mocking smile.

"As you overslept yourself this morning, Miss Barton, I thought you would be anxious to make up for lost time."

"How charming of you, Krajova, to think of

that. Only, as it happens, I rose from my maiden couch early, so as to be able to say good-bye to a brother, who was due back in France."

Having completed the distribution of the mail in that part of the room, Marie returned to the sorting-table for further correspondence.

"Lunch interval," "Misery" Minton announced. "Play will be resumed at two o'clock. Go on with your story, 'Kitten', I'm positively thrilled. Who is the mystery merchant?"

"Kitten" considered the matter for some seconds.

"Jimmy didn't say, and I'm fairly certain he was not in a position to know as much as that. If he had been, I'd have wormed it out of him."

Memory flashed a message.

"Now I come to think of it, he mentioned something about a nickname. Rather a quaint one." She looked puzzled. "I'll think of it, if you don't fluster me. 'Shimmy', no. 'Cammy—something'. 'Chameleon'. That was the word."

"Why that nickname?"

Suggestions came from all sides.

"Wears a wig."

"Dyes his hair, more likely."

"And keeps altering the colour."

"Except at the roots."

"Pessimist."

Then "Smiles" had a bright idea.

"Perhaps he has blacked himself all over like the man who played Othello, and wanted to get into the skin of the part."

A general laugh at this, except from Loschka. She alone sat silent, with eyes very wide open. A possible meaning of the nickname had come into her

mind, as she recalled Morris's black hair and swarthy complexion.

At this point a question was put by Nesta, who had listened attentively.

"If some man has changed into another, what has happened to the one whose place was taken?"

"Kitten" Barton became very serious.

"He disappeared, so Jimmy said."

"Where?"

"When I asked, he swore he didn't know. But he was quite certain of the vanishing trick."

"Perhaps the other man was taken to the Tower and shot at dawn."

"It sounds to me rather a tall story," was the comment of "Misery", and there it seemed the discussion was to be brought to a close.

Nesta, however, had something further to ask.

"Didn't you say all this had some connection with the censors? In what way?"

But "Kitten" could only shake her head slowly. She could supply no answer. A certain veiled eagerness about Nesta's question attracted the attention of Loschka.

"Can she suspect something?" the Russian asked herself, and decided to keep the girl under surreptitious observation from that moment.

"If Marling has a secret, I'll discover it."

Loschka's mind harked back to what she had been hearing, and a threatening fire glowed in her eyes. The story of the man who had become another should be tested.

If her suspicions should prove correct—she would know how to act.

CHAPTER XXI

THE DANGER ZONE

FOUR days later Alderson arrived from an important tour along the South Coast, which had necessitated a week's absence from the metropolis.

As soon as the train came to a standstill he descended from a first-class carriage, still wearing his disguise. A wary glance about him, to make certain that he was not under observation, and he set off for the tube station, clutching tightly a bag attached to his wrist by a delicate chain of steel. And so to Piccadilly.

Hardly had he entered Morris's sitting-room when the telephone began to ring.

"You had better attend to that, Blake. Say I'm expected home to-morrow. I have quite enough to keep me occupied for the rest of the day without fixing any further appointments."

"Shouldn't be surprised, sir, if it was that foreign lady again. She's rung up this number twice already in the last three days. Just about this time, too. She seemed very anxious to find out when you would be home, but, of course, I could say nothing about it."

"What name?"

"She gave none, sir."

"Oh, well, to-morrow will do." Then with a sudden gesture, he delayed Blake from raising the receiver. "Foreign, did you say?"

"Rather a queer voice, sir."

An idea suggested itself.

"If this is the same person, give me a nod. I'd like to listen myself."

Blake answered the call.

"Mr. Morris's man speaking. Who is that?"

After listening to the first few words coming over the wire, he signed to his master to come to the instrument.

Not many seconds were necessary to confirm Alderson's suspicion. With a smile, he covered the transmitter by his hand, so as to render himself inaudible.

"Tell her I've been to the North of England and am due home late this evening. If she asks for an appointment, make it midday to-morrow."

The manservant gave the message.

"You don't require to see Mr. Morris personally? Very good, miss. He will hear from you in the morning about ten o'clock. Thank you, miss. I'll give the master your message on his return."

The receiver was replaced.

"Can I do anything further, sir?"

Alderson thought an instant.

"Coffee in half an hour. I've already lunched. Leave the bag. It will be ready for unpacking when you come up again."

"Very good, sir."

Left to himself, Alderson lit a cigar, one of Morris's special brand. It was strange to realize how in those few weeks he had passed from active dislike to indifference and thence almost to mild enjoyment. Seeing that he had set himself the task of keeping up all Morris's customs in the way of

smoking, it was indeed a relief to find this change had taken place.

Leaning back in an easy chair he puffed away in leisurely fashion, while he allowed his memory to dwell on the episodes connected with this foreign woman's voice.

It was the very same one he had heard on those two previous occasions.

On the first, she had taken fright and rung off in a hurry, and he had been unable to trace her identity beyond the fact that she had been using a public telephone-box at Moorgate Street Station. Obviously she was a foreigner, with a distinctive accent and a rather exceptional quality in her voice. It might be recognizable away from the telephone, but he could not be sure on this point. As to her name and address, he was absolutely in the dark, and even her nationality was largely guess-work.

When this woman had been in communication with him on the second occasion, he had met with greater success. After giving the code sentence 'one nought one speaking', she had demanded the counter-sign. This he had naturally been unable to supply, whereat she had made it perfectly clear she did not believe herself to be conversing with Paul Morris.

Alderson's face showed curves of amusement as he began wondering what she supposed to be taking place. No doubt she had thought that someone-else was trying to pass himself off as Morris for some reason of his own. Very probably she suspected the manservant of imitating his master's voice in the hope of surprising some secret capable of being turned to his ultimate advantage.

Something of this kind must have passed through the woman's mind. But, that she could have any inkling of the actual truth, he himself did not for one moment believe.

When the telephone had been cut off suddenly on this second occasion, he had found no difficulty whatever in carrying his investigation to a more or less satisfactory conclusion.

Spurred to activity by his urgent instructions, the operator had succeeded in obtaining with commendable promptness the telephone number from which the call had originated. Instead of a public box, this time it had been an ordinary subscriber.

Within five minutes of setting the official machinery in motion, Alderson found himself speaking to the manager of "Le Bon Viver". Half an hour later he had arrived at the eating-house, and was ordering as lavish a supper as the *carte du jour* and modest wine-list permitted, while throughout the meal he kept up his rôle of Paul Morris.

Had less important stakes been involved, he could have revealed his identity, cross-examined the manager and the entire staff, and extracted every possible item of information.

But that course had to be avoided at all costs. Otherwise the story of the disguise would inevitably have spread in ever-widening circles. It would have become a tempting tit-bit of conversation (confidential, of course!) to a favoured customer, to the particular cronies of the staff, and perhaps to their women-folk. If this happened, then good-bye to any hope of secrecy, for the news would be all over the town in a week. And after a month? His game

of counter-espionage would have been ruined.

On arriving at "Le Bon Viver", therefore, he could only offer openings for conversation and for the raking up of casual reminiscences. He was well repaid by some of these, and two incidents were particularly instructive.

Did Monsieur recall that night when an air-raid general warning had been sent out? The waiter recollected how he had been unwilling to knock on the door of the *chambre séparée*, for fear of causing interruption. When at last he had tapped—oh, very discreetly—and announced that an air-raid was expected, how Monsieur had laughed. "Not by me, Henri. Bring some more absinthe." And, behold, it was as Monsieur had said. There was nothing. It was all a mistake.

Then there had been the other time, when Monsieur telephoned as usual to reserve the same room at the start of the month, but an hour later countermanded the order. For the first time in more than two years. Because he had been unexpectedly called to the country.

"That night, as it happened—do you remember, Monsieur?—there was an air-raid—oh, *vair* bad—over the centre of London. And when you came with Mademoiselle, you joked with the manager and told him the big devil always looked after the little devils. *C'était très drôle.*"

After hearing these two anecdotes, Alderson had put out feelers to discover whether anyone knew the name of Morris's companion. It was evident, however, that this had never been mentioned in the hearing of the staff. All that he could do was to obtain confirmation of his idea that she might be a

Slav, together with a few hints as to general appearance.

On reaching this point in his reverie, Alderson broke off, a puzzled expression in his face.

He had followed up that memorable first visit to "Le Bon Viseur" by reserving the private room for what he had learned to be the usual day at the start of the succeeding month. But to his chagrin he had waited at the restaurant in vain for the unknown woman to appear.

"Last time it was Mademoiselle who was disappointed," the manager remarked. "And now, it is Monsieur himself. The fortunes of war."

With a jest on his lips, Alderson had paid for the room, tipped Henri, and departed.

From then onwards he had received no sign of the woman's existence.

Twice he had telephoned to "Le Bon Viseur", only to receive the same answer, Mademoiselle had not visited the place. On the last occasion he had given definite instructions for the manager to telephone to him at once in the event of the Slav arriving there.

He had written down Morris's exchange number and made an excuse which would avert all suspicion. Now after all this while of complete silence, the unknown woman had suddenly started ringing up his address.

What was the explanation? Alderson asked himself the question without being able to give any answer.

"Mr. Morris will hear from me to-morrow morning at about ten o'clock!"

That was the message she had asked Blake to deliver.

Ten o'clock!

Very well. He would "wait and see". Perhaps the following day would make everything clear to him.

Meanwhile, to-day was still here, and there was plenty to occupy his attention.

As a preliminary precaution he locked the door of the sitting-room. Having done so, he removed "The Storm" picture in the recess, slid back the panel, opened the safe and shut away several bundles of documents which he had brought back from the South Coast.

Then he took the remaining papers from the bag and slipped them into a secret drawer of the writing-table where they would be easy of access.

Then with a knock on the outer door and a turn of the key Blake entered with the coffee.

Alderson drank it with thirsty appreciation and turned to his work.

Not till close on midnight had everything been accomplished to his satisfaction, after many hours of concentrated attention interrupted only once for a hurried evening meal.

"Ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

He repeated the words aloud. Somehow that foreign woman's message seemed to have made a deep impression. But ten o'clock came next day, and went. Half-past, and then eleven. Yet still nothing had happened.

Not till a quarter of an hour later was the meaning of Loschka's words brought home to him.

CHAPTER XXII

A NARROW ESCAPE

THE door of the sitting-room was thrown open without the slightest warning.

Alderson did not look up at once from the delicate work on which he had been engaged. His first thought was for the papers, and he hurried them out of sight, pushing them into the interior of the large roll-desk.

Blake, although of necessity in his master's confidence to some extent, could not be allowed even a glimpse at the intricate operation which called for such concentrated attention.

The Secret-Service man slammed down the curved front of the writing-table and heard the click of the massive lock with a feeling of relief.

At the same moment, however, there was a jarring noise, followed by the breaking of glass from within the desk. He heard the clinking clearly enough, but at the time thought no more about it.

"Haven't I told you—" he began in a tone of annoyance, then broke off.

The man who had entered thus announced was none other than Inspector Wilson.

"You?"

A look of astonishment accompanied the question.

"Surely you've no reason to be surprised," was the C.I.D. man's reply.

"How so?" Alderson's voice became somewhat

reproachful. "Didn't we decide it would be wiser for you never to call on me at Jermyn Street? After all, why run unnecessary risks?"

Even as he said this he altered his mood, realizing from the expression on the other's face that some serious situation must have arisen.

"What brought you here so unexpectedly?"

The intonation sounded almost apologetic.

The Inspector became very grave.

"Probably you do not yet realize that you have had an extremely narrow escape from meeting your death through a bomb. It was to have been delivered at this address at ten o'clock this morning if everything had gone according to plan."

Alderson gripped the arms of the chair.

"Ten o'clock?"

The other shrugged his shoulders in perplexity.

"Nothing so very amazing, is there, about that particular hour?"

The reason was quickly explained.

"Just after I had returned yesterday afternoon, the Slav woman"—this was the phrase they used to describe the unknown—"sent a phone message that I should hear from her at that precise time."

The Inspector whistled softly.

"So the Slav was responsible. At any rate, we're slightly better off this time. The parcel is down at the Yard, with her handwriting on it. Disguised, possibly, but there is the postmark as well to go on. Perhaps though you yourself have had some more to do with her since that time when she started mistaking you for Morris over the phone, and ended in fright by ringing off because you didn't answer

'abracadabra', or whatever magical word had been fixed up between them."

Alderson became thoughtful.

"As a matter of fact, I've had some queer experiences with her one way and another," his eyes sparkled humorously, "including a *chambre séparée* at 'Le Bon Viveur'."

"Aha! Sounds promising!"

Evidently the French phrase suggested alluring possibilities, which were reflected in the Inspector's face. The picture thus presented caused Alderson to emit a dry chuckle.

"The episode was not nearly as—episodic as you seem to imagine. There was no question of a woman tempting me. As a matter of fact, the Slav passed the first portion of the evening alone in the *chambre séparée*. Half an hour after she had left, I arrived and spent the remainder, also on my lonesome. So you see, she was as '*separée*' as the room."

Thence the conversation passed to the further reason for the Inspector's visit to Jermyn Street.

"I've come here because something has happened which concerns me very closely, and ever since the bomb affair in Piccadilly, the Yard has been taking no chances. A regular gang may be at work. Anyhow, from that day we've been looking after quite a number of prominent folk, yourself included, in addition to our regular arrangements."

Alderson professed a humorous surprise.

"Why my insignificant carcass?"

But the detective treated the matter with entire seriousness.

"It would be difficult to exaggerate your value to the Allied Cause at the present time. I have it on

good authority that certain exalted persons are expecting a great deal from your game of Diamond Cut Diamond. It's our business at the Yard to see they are not disappointed. Tests are applied to all parcels for delivery at certain addresses, among which by no means the least important is 315, Jermyn Street."

"Do you mean to tell me that all this trouble is being taken on my account?"

"Had it not been in existence, I don't know where you would have been for the last two hours."

Alderson began pacing up and down the room.

"So it was as near as that, eh? In fact, I owe you my life."

There was a short silence.

"And now what?" he continued at last. "Of course, as soon as the Slav woman learns that she has failed, she will make another attempt. Try, try, try again—until at last she succeeds."

"Oh, but she must not try again. We must take measures to prevent her from doing so."

Alderson looked puzzled.

"How is that possible, when she is still unknown?"

An artful expression came into the Inspector's face. Evidently he had come well prepared.

"Naturally we shall continue exercising the same precautions as before. In addition, it would be advisable, I think, for your man to refuse any packages brought to the door by hand, unless he is quite certain of the source from which they have come. It may cause a certain amount of bother, I'm afraid, but no doubt you can find ways of minimizing the inconvenience. There is another little

plan, though, which I came here to discuss. If it meets with your approval, I only have to give the word to set the whole machine in motion. Indeed complete arrangements were made before I left, so everything ought to go through without a hitch."

Ten minutes sufficed to explain the plan evolved and to obtain unqualified approval of it.

"Then the idea appeals to you?" the Inspector asked.

"Undoubtedly," was the prompt reply, "what's more, I like your subtle humour. By all means carry on. Better use my telephone, that will save time."

Before going over to the instrument, Wilson paused to put into words something which was on his mind.

"When the official report appears it will be so worded that in all probability she will keep away from this neighbourhood. But there is another thing that strikes me; when you answer the phone, you always do so in Morris's voice. Isn't that so?"

The other nodded.

"Supposing for some unknown reason she suspected anything and decided to test the truth by ringing up the address. If she heard the voice which she believed to be Morris—what then?"

Alderson rubbed his chin, and cogitated for some little time, while he made up his mind how best to evade the predicament. At last he saw a method of doing so.

"There is but one way out of the difficulty. I must have a secretary to answer the phone and ascertain who is at the other end of the wire."

The Inspector eyed the suggestion with aversion. Evidently it did not strike him favourably.

"It seems to me," he observed at length, "such a course would be distinctly dangerous."

"Ah, but not with the secretary I should use," Alderson responded with a twinkle in his eye. "Let me illustrate what I propose to do."

He went through an imaginary scene at the phone, using his natural voice instead of giving the imitation of the spy whose rooms he was occupying.

"Mr. Morris's secretary speaking. Who is that, please?" A short pause, as though he were listening. Then: "If you will hold the line a moment, sir, I will fetch Mr. Morris."

Any doubts which Inspector Wilson might have had were at once dispelled.

"Then we can go straight ahead with our plan."

A number was rung up, and the instructions were given for which preparation had already been made.

Within the hour the newspaper boys could be heard shouting their sensational headlines.

CHAPTER XXIII

STARTLING NEWS

THE censors were making their way back to Salisbury House from the various luncheon places in the neighbourhood.

As Loschka emerged from one of the teashops in Moorgate Street, her eye was caught by a poster in an early edition of the *Evening Times*.

BOMB IN WEST END

In another minute she was standing in a vacant doorway scanning eagerly the scare headlines on the front page.

BOMB EXPLOSION OFF PICCADILLY ONE KILLED SENSATIONAL THEORY

With a curious expression in her face she ran her eyes over the details. The official report stated that the house where the fatality had taken place was in Jermyn Street. No number was mentioned.

Apparently while the parcel was being opened by the person to whom it had been addressed, there had been an explosion. Instantaneous death had followed, while the room itself was completely

wrecked. As this, however, was in the back part of the building nothing was visible from the street.

An artful touch on which Inspector Wilson rather prided himself!

The victim of the outrage was a foreigner who had been naturalized and who, during recent months, had come under the suspicion of the authorities. Steps taken to obtain evidence as to certain of his activities had proved completely successful, and a warrant for his arrest was on the point of being issued.

Fate, however (according to the sub-editorial interpolation) had dramatically intervened at the eleventh hour.

For some considerable time, so the official report further stated, the man had been associated with a Russian woman, but recently their friendship had been discontinued owing, it was believed, to a quarrel. It was known that large sums of money had been paid into his bank account from time to time, and according to the police theory, disagreement had arisen over the division of the spoils and the crime had been one of revenge.

Loschka read the report with a malignant look of satisfaction, and at that moment was joined by one of the censors in her room.

They hurried down Moorgate Street together, silently threading their way along the crowded pavement and only when they came in sight of the actual building did they slacken pace.

"Let's have a squint at your paper before we go in," "Misery" remarked.

"If you wish," was the reply. "But there is no exciting news."

All the same, the other remained unconvinced.

"From the way you were looking, Loschka, I should have thought something rather tremendous had been announced. You were positively gloating. Just as though the British had made a complete break-through—or had sunk the entire enemy fleet, or—honestly, anything might have happened."

"I assure you there was nothing."

Still there was an oddly emotional throb in Loschka's voice, which belied her words.

"If that is so," "Misery" objected, "why were you giving that weird smile?"

"Was I smiling?" the Russian asked with an air of innocence that bore tribute to her powers of dissimulation.

"What a question! Come on. Give me the old *Evening Times*. Hul-lo-o-o!" The exclamation was long drawn out, as she glimpsed the headlines. "Another bomb in Piccadilly? Well, I'm damned."

In this way "Misery" Minton and Loschka managed to extend their luncheon interval to the very last moment before returning to duty.

Nesta Marling, on the contrary, after hurrying back a quarter of an hour earlier, was deep in conversation with the D.A.C.

"There is nothing definite to report yet," she informed her superior. "But I'm on the track. If only—" Nesta hesitated.

"What is stopping you?" Mrs. Johnson questioned.

"There is a way of making certain, but it's dangerous. If I turned out to have made a mistake, I don't quite see how things could go back to where they were." There was a tinge of vexation in her

voice. "It's almost maddening to be placed in such a position. From time to time I get a glimpse of—what I am after—but there is no opportunity of making absolutely sure."

Mrs. Johnson looked at the girl.

"Unless you yourself—make the opportunity."

Nesta was rather startled at such a suggestion being made.

"You can't mean—what I mean!"

"Are you sure of that?" was the soft response.

"I can't be more explicit, I'm afraid."

A slight gesture dismissed the subject.

"It takes a very great deal of tact to be head of a room," Nesta observed, with a certain admiration noticeable in her manner.

The implied praise was quickly brushed aside.

"Mere common sense. That's all. When you have carried out your investigation, why don't you apply for the post? At any time they would be only too pleased to make you a D.A.C. for the mere asking. One word to Sir Hugo and it would be done."

But, as it seemed, this was the precise reason why it would not be done.

"As it happens, I know the Farninghams rather well. His daughter and I were school-friends, and I've dined at their place more than once. If that came out, think of all the unpleasantness it would cause. No wire-pulling, thank you!"

Mrs. Johnson remained entirely unimpressed by these remarks.

"The choice would be purely a matter of merit. No one could possibly think otherwise. At any rate, no one whose opinion was worth considering."

"It's very nice of you to say so. Unfortunately, on such occasions the loudest tongues seem to be of most account. Besides, I should prefer to remain a reader. The work to my mind is far more interesting. Don't you agree? Apart from that, I'm always rather sorry for anyone placed in authority over a room filled with our sex. It's hardly an enviable position."

Mrs. Johnson did not answer at once. At least, not in words. But the expression in her face gave some indication of what was passing through her mind.

More interesting to be a reader?

She had never considered that aspect of the case. How lucky anyone was to whom the financial side of the situation was of no importance. As for herself, she had striven terribly hard to obtain the position of D.A.C. without the slightest influence to help her efforts.

When at last she had succeeded in reaching her aim, she had been a little proud and profoundly thankful because of the extra remuneration involved.

Yet here was Nesta Marling, daughter of a lord, and deliberately refusing to avail herself of social advantages. She was able to choose practically what work she liked, yet she was merely concerned with the question which of the two positions would prove of greater interest.

There was a hint of envy, when Mrs. Johnson spoke at last.

"In your case, naturally the money question does not enter into it. You are wise to remain as you are, and, quite between ourselves, you are doing

much more useful work. As for looking after women, I should prefer to superintend a bag full of fleas, if I had the choice."

Sighing rather wearily she turned to Francesca who had come over at that moment.

"What is it, Miss Napoli?"

A raising of the eyebrows, while the Italian exhibited a letter, held as far from her as possible between tip of thumb and first finger. She presented a picture of patrician disgust.

"*Scusate!* I do not know how to treat this correspondence. It has been sent by some person, who is entirely—" a contemptuous sniff was introduced at this point—"of the people. The paper is dirty. The handwriting illegible."

"Can you make out nothing at all?"

An expressive shrug. "A phrase here and there."

"Well?"

The inflection invited confidence.

"The mind is even more soiled than the document."

Mrs. Johnson glanced through a couple of pages, and offered gentle reproof.

"We are not here to censor morals, to improve literary style or even to impose habits of bodily cleanliness. I do not see how you can keep back that letter simply for the reasons you have stated."

The reproof brought a frown of annoyance.

"As you wish, Mrs. Johnson. For myself, I abominate—the people."

Returning to her table, Francesca exhibited to her neighbours the offensive document.

"What an appalling scrawl," "Misery" com-

mented sympathetically. "Anyone who writes like that ought to be rationed. One picture-postcard per week, with six words of greeting, perhaps."

With that, she turned her attention to Kitty Barton, who was always a ready target for her shafts of humour.

"Well, old thing? What's the latest rumour? You generally know all about everything that doesn't take place. All right, don't get huffy, only it's rather comic that a real live bomb explosion should have occurred this morning—in Jermyn Street—and someone been killed, without your knowing anything whatever about it."

At the mention of Jermyn Street, Marie Krajova looked up from her work and fixed her eyes on the speaker.

"Are you sure of that, Miss Minton?"

"There is a full official report on the front page of the *Evening Times*. Loschie was awfully bucked about it. Hand over your paper, cipher one nought one, and let the pretty lady read all the bloodthirsty details."

Marie glanced rapidly over the account.

"They do not give the number of the house."

"Oh, well," "Misery" pointed out, "they'd hardly do that, if there was any idea of spies being mixed up in the affair. Here, what's the matter, Krajova? You're as white as a sheet. Claw hold of her, someone."

But before they could do so, Marie had slipped to the floor in a faint.

"What's up with her, I wonder?"

"Kitten" at once uttered the thought which was usually prominent in her mind.

"Probably Krajova's keen on some boy who has rooms there."

"Misery" gave a dry laugh.

"If Loschie knows anyone in Jermyn Street, she must hate him like hell."

CHAPTER XXIV

STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

WHEN Mrs. Johnson set out on her final "missionary journey" around the room, the hands of the clock were pointing towards ten minutes to six, and little more than half an hour of work remained.

Coming to a halt at the table where Marie Krajova was sitting she spoke in a tone of concern. "You are looking very far from well, Miss Krajova. After recovering from that faint you should have gone home as I suggested."

"It was very kind of you, but I assure you there was no need." The voice sounded nervously tense. "Have I failed to carry out my duties to your satisfaction?"

"That was not in the least what I meant. Your eyes tell their story too clearly for misunderstanding. You would have escaped your headache if only you had taken my advice. Why wouldn't you do so? I'm sure Miss Marling would have been only too happy to undertake the distribution of the afternoon mail."

At the words, a faintly ironical smile came into Nesta's face, for being in the adjoining place she could hardly avoid overhearing the conversation.

"Come now," Mrs. Johnson went on, "you really must allow me to persuade you."

But Marie was obstinate.

"I have managed as far as this and would prefer to continue until the very end."

"If you like to leave, I can censor the rest of your

letters," Nesta offered, with an eagerness she concealed with difficulty.

Marie swallowed, then refused the proposal.

"Thank you, Miss Marling, but I recognized the handwriting on two or three of those envelopes. They are cases which I have been watching most carefully. Some of their previous letters seemed rather suspicious, and if these are similar in character, I shall recommend the names for the black list."

There seemed no alternative for Nesta but to return to the correspondence on which she had been engaged. She made a pretence of reading a four-page domestic effusion obviously innocent in character, but all the time her thoughts remained concentrated on the discussion which was taking place.

A surreptitious glance assured her that the Roumanian's attention was fully occupied by the D.A.C. Therefore, for a few brief moments she allowed her eyes to fall on the envelopes which had been chosen by Marie with so much care.

As far as possible in the short time at her disposal, she memorized the various names and addresses. If only she could have a chance of reading the letters themselves after they had been passed by the Roumanian, they might provide the decisive evidence which she was so anxious to obtain.

Of course such an opportunity could not arise, the idea was almost fantastic, and reaching this conclusion Nesta resumed the perusal of the document before her.

"So remember, my dear boy, to be very careful, when you see aeroplanes coming towards you. You never know what might——"

Suddenly Mrs. Johnson's words came back to her.

"Unless you yourself make the opportunity."

With a little frown of determination, there and then she registered a vow to do so as soon as a plan could be thought out.

She became aware that Mrs. Johnson was giving instructions to the Roumanian and her body relaxed from the tenseness of resolve since no action could be taken at present.

"Very well, Miss Krajova," the D.A.C. was saying, "if you prefer to follow up the correspondence yourself, put everything by in your drawer till to-morrow."

It was evident Marie had no further objection to offer for she rose and made ready to depart.

"That's right," Mrs. Johnson smiled with quite a maternal air, "and now, my dear, go straight home, lie down and take a couple of aspirins. Will you promise to do as I say?"

A scarcely appreciable hesitation preceded the response.

"Thank you for your good advice." Although the tone sounded full of gratitude, nevertheless the words were non-committal.

"If you don't feel absolutely yourself in the morning," came the final instructions, "don't report here till afternoon. Better still, take sick leave and have the full day off. Get up after lunch and go out to some place which will involve spending the afternoon in the open air."

For the next half-hour there was a general hush in the room, one of those silences which passed for noiselessness yet was filled with the many sounds of slitting and scraping, scratching and stamping.

Six-thirty came and then ensued a pushing back of chairs, an opening of drawers, a banging of books, a swishing together of envelopes, a taking down of numbers—so many letters censored by this one, so many by that—a moving aside of parcels, a striking of matches, a clicking of petrol lighters, a puffing of cigarettes, a little laughter and a great deal of chatter.

When "Misery" Minton had made ready for leaving, her eyes as usual sought those of her *fidus achates*, "Smiles" Brighten.

"What's the programme for this evening?"

"I'm on for any damned thing," was the careless rejoinder.

"Then let's have a wild night up West."

"I'm game for a binge."

Loschka happened to be standing beside them and "Misery" suddenly recalled how she had chaffed the foreigner over the strange expression she had worn while reading of the bomb explosion. A brilliant idea came into her mind.

"What about you coming with us?"

Kitty Barton joined the conversation at this point.

"Let's make a foursome and go round the full eighteen-course hole at Madame Leblanc's restaurant. I've been meaning to do it for ages, besides, Madame has promised her husband will give us special terms. Isn't that so?"

She appealed to the Frenchwoman who had been delayed by Mrs. Johnson to discuss some point.

"Leave all that to me, *chérie*. *Nous verrons ce que nous verrons*. And the wine shall be— How do you say it?—'In me'.—On me?"

The three exchanged glances, then nodded with one accord.

"Very well. To-night it shall be."

"*Bien*," exclaimed the Frenchwoman. "*Et vous, Mademoiselle Loschka?*"

Ever since the day when the counter-sign had not been given over the phone from Morris's rooms, the Russian had been fearing lest some unknown peril should come on her through means of which she was unaware.

Somehow, in some way, conditions had been altered. A treacherous attempt had been made to betray her, and therefore from that day onwards she had avoided "*Le Bon Viseur*", where in the past the secret meetings had taken place.

Now, however, because of the bomb explosion in Jermyn Street, all danger was at an end. The mysterious man who had tried to trap her was evidently dead so there was no further cause for fear.

An ugly gleam of triumph came into her eyes as she thought of that announcement in the *Evening Times*.

This was, indeed, an occasion for rejoicing. And where better could such a celebration take place than at "*Le Bon Viseur*"?

Once more there was on her face that smile which "*Misery*" had noticed earlier in the day.

"I shall be *vairly* pleased."

Madame Leblanc beamed satisfaction.

"*Eh, bien*, I make to go at once. In one hour you arrive, and all shall be prepared. You shall see. *Après une heure. A bientôt.*"

Loschka thought for a moment.

"I will accompany Madame. It is too far to return to my own apartment."

"Enchantée, Mademoiselle."

Whereupon the Frenchwoman and the Russian hustled off together.

On emerging from Salisbury House, Loschka confided her real reason for going off with Madame.

"You were not aware, but it so 'appens that for a long time I was accustomed to meet a gentleman friend at 'Le Bon Vivreur'."

"En effet, then, you are already a client. That is nice. I am very glad."

"Yes, Madame, I came regular."

"Why then 'ave I not seen you there? I always go into the large dining-room to make the compliments to our customers."

Loschka answered in an undertone.

"My friend and I had the habit of spending the evening in Room Number II."

"Oh? O-oh! O-o-oh!" the vocalized comments passed from the playful, through the sentimental, to the mock reproachful.

Then she half-closed her eyes.

"Je vous comprend assez bien. And you do not wish that they know of it, these English misses, *hein?* You desire that I warn the staff, so that when you arrive, they have never seen you. They do not know you. For the first time you are visiting us."

"Parfaitement," Loschka agreed.

This made the Frenchwoman chuckle plumply.

"Je trouve une bonne idée. Très amusante, vous savez. The dinner shall be served—in Room Number II. But this time there will be no *Monsieur*

l'Inconnu. Instead you will have your English misses. Leave all to me. I shall speak to Henri! You know him well, you. I will explain to him that he have seen you nevaire before. Nevaire, nevaire."

When a few minutes later the three English girls left Salisbury House it was not long before they became equally confidential.

"You are always chipping me," "Kitten" announced, "about rumours. I've been waiting to get 'my own' back. Why should I say anything about to-day's explosion when it only happened after we had started work at the Censor's? There wasn't much point in shouting out after lunch what everyone had already been reading on the placards."

"That's right enough."

"Then why did you pull my leg like that, 'Misery', and ask whether I had any rumours to distribute?"

"Oh, well, 'Kitten', I knew you were a good hand at taking a joke."

"All the same, it was rather riling, considering I had something a good deal more substantial than a mere rumour, and was obliged to keep it to myself."

"I don't see why you couldn't out with it," "Smiles" remarked in a note of hopeful anticipation, "we are all under an oath of secrecy. If we couldn't be trusted, we wouldn't be censors at all."

"What do you mean by 'we'?"

"Why, everyone."

"Kitten" looked warily about her.

There was a tiny alley close to where they were standing, and not a person was to be seen there.

"Come along up here where no one can listen. I'm going to tell you something—rather special."

When they had moved to a spot some yards away from the main thoroughfare "Kitten" grew confidential.

"If everyone is to be trusted—absolutely everyone—can you explain this? It's in the strictest confidence, mind, and you mustn't ask how I found out—because it was quite unintentional. I went into the wrong room—by accident. Honour bright, it was. And I'll tell you something! If my uncle hadn't been"—suddenly she became very secretive—"who he is, I can't imagine what would have happened. At least I can imagine—and it wouldn't have been very pleasant, I can promise you that. Anyhow—we're all three English, so that makes it O.K. as long as you don't breathe a word to a living soul."

"Are you trying to work up an atmosphere of mystery so as 'to give verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative'," "Misery" quoted, chaffing.

The interruption was ignored by "Kitten".

"If everyone is so entire trustworthy, why are letters being abstracted from the mailbags and reopened after being passed by a censor, and then closed up again by the official label? Because that is what lately has been going on!"

"Is it a positive fact?" "Smiles" asked in half-disbelief.

"There is no doubt whatever."

"Misery" added a question.

"What happens after they've been taken out from the mail?"

But "Kitten" Barton could throw no light on this point.

"I tried to get that out of my uncle. I'm certain he knew something. What's more, when I said so, he shut up at once and gave a very worthy imitation of an oyster."

"Not very satisfactory," "Misery" commented.

"I should think not," "Kitten" agreed. "Knowing what I do about uncle—when he turns himself into a kind of perambulating tomb, there is generally one explanation."

"What's that?" The other girls questioned in unison.

"Kitten's" manner became unusually impressive.

"It's some hush-hush stunt."

CHAPTER XXV

ONE NOUGHT ONE

ON leaving Salisbury House the trio of censors made made their way to the Bank and took the tube westwards.

As the train slowed down for Tottenham Court Road, Kitty Barton began to rise.

"Not yet, old thing," "Misery" remarked. "We're going further."

"But we get out here for Soho," "Kitten" expostulated.

"Quite so, but we're not making for Madame Leblanc's little old eating-house just yet," "Misery" explained, pulling the girl down again to the seat. "Don't let go of her, 'Smiles'."

A preliminary jerk, then the train started on another stage of its journey.

"What on earth are you two playing at this time?"

By way of reply, "Misery" quoted Asquith with all due solemnity.

"Wait and see."

Arrived at the tube station at Oxford Circus the trio pushed their way to the platform and made for the lift.

"What's the game?" "Kitten" asked, as she found the others heading in the direction of Piccadilly.

"We're going to pay a state visit to the scene of the crime," was the explanation.

"This morning's bomb explosion?"

A head-jerk of assent.

"We thought that one way and another it would be rather a thrill. Besides, it ought to be in our line if the newspaper report can be believed."

"You mean—about the victim having been under suspicion?"

"Quite."

"If that is so, some of the correspondence may have passed through our hands. Rather an alluring possibility."

"Distinctly."

"Kitten" became reflective.

"Jermyn Street? I seem to have a vague sort of remembrance there has been something fishy connected with that address. Does anyone know the number of the house where the actual explosion took place?"

"It wasn't mentioned in the official report at lunch time."

"Perhaps the omission was accidental. We may find it in the later editions."

"Haven't seen any."

"Then let's get one."

Startling news had arrived from the front and an elderly newsvendor was disposing of his supply of papers as fast as he could take the pennies. A copy of the *Evening Times* "seven o'clock" was purchased by "Smiles", and studied with eagerness. No further facts, however, seemed to be forthcoming to supplement the first account of the fatality.

"There is no mention of the number that I can see," "Smiles" announced in a somewhat apologetic tone.

"Are you quite sure? Let's have a squint." With which "Kitten" took the copy and glanced through the details with complete sang-froid.

"You're perfectly correct. What's more, the report says distinctly that nothing can be seen from the street to indicate an explosion has taken place. Rather rough on us. You've brought us on a wild-goose chase."

An impressive shrug.

"That's that, I suppose. It would have been better to get out at Tottenham Court Road as we originally intended." "Misery" disagreed.

"Don't you believe it. They only put that bit in to keep away the crowds of sensation seekers."

"Such as—Miss Minton and Miss Brighten," joked Kitty, thereby provoking a quick retort.

"Don't try to bluff. You'll be as keen as anybody to have a look at the place if anything is to be seen."

"If."

The inflexion suggested infinite disbelief.

"Oh, well, here we are, anyhow. So we shall soon be able to find out whether they were lying or not."

The trio thrilled expectantly on entering Jermyn Street. They dawdled slowly along the pavement on the Piccadilly side, their eyes searching each building in turn for some indication of broken windows. Reaching the end, they moved over to the South Side and made their way back in the other direction. But they arrived at the start of the three hundreds without any indication of success, and not many more houses remained for their examination.

Then came a sudden halt, while they exchanged glances. Evidently they had come to a simultaneous conclusion.

With a promptness little short of amazing for the fourth year of the War, new panes of glass must have been inserted, so as to camouflage the fact that this explosion had taken place.

Viewed from the standpoint of the mere private householder, such an event partook almost of some miraculous eighth day of Creation.

Government departments were, however, in quite a different position. They could carry through what they liked, when they liked, if the necessity actually arose. Especially if there were something to conceal.

The three girls decided that the situation was extremely annoying, since the expedition had proved a wild-geese chase, precisely as predicted.

"Kitten" pronounced judgment.

"A complete wash-out."

"It was my own idea," "Misery" volunteered, "so blame it on me, if you like. Anyhow, whether you do or not, we'd best be getting along to the restaurant, or there'll be trouble."

"Smiles" backed up her pal at once.

"I should think so indeed. If we're late, Loschie will give us one of those 'more in sorrow', down-trodden, Slav looks of hers."

"That would be preferable to her mood after lunch," "Misery" assented. And for once she was entirely serious.

"You know," she resumed. "Her expression when I came on her reading the *Evening Times* made me feel positively uncomfortable. If I knew she had something against me, I'd get out of her

way mighty quick—in fact, p.d.q., before she had the chance of—hullo-o-o !”

She broke off her remark in an exclamation of surprise, and the other girls followed the line of her gaze to a doorway some twenty yards ahead.

A low whistle of astonishment from “Smiles”.

“Krajova, by all that’s wonderful. How extraordinary. She left the Censor’s early to go straight home to lie down, as she had such a bad headache. Don’t you remember? What on earth is she doing here?”

But no answer seemed forthcoming though there was certainly something very odd about her behaviour.

Without looking their way, Marie set off in the opposite direction, and as she did so, they followed her with their eyes till she turned the corner.

“Kitten” was the first to break the ensuing silence.

“Do you recollect what I said when Krajova fainted this afternoon?”

“You made some suggestion that she might have been keen on a fellow who had rooms in Jermyn Street. This looks as though you were right.”

In any case, whoever the Roumanian had been to see, it was evident from her manner as she came out of the house again that the man killed in the explosion had not resided there.

“Let’s walk past the door and have a look at the number,” “Misery” proposed.

“It would be tremendous fun to tease Krajova to-morrow about this. We can pretend that we all spent the evening at the address.”

The decision made, they sauntered along and glanced up at the door.

Three hundred and fifteen.

"Now let's cross over and walk back." The proposal this time came from Kitty Barton. "If we peep up at the windows, we might have a chance of seeing her boy. We could have any amount of amusement from it afterwards."

They carried out the manœuvre according to plan, but without result. At least very nearly so, but although the windows showed no sign of "Marie's little love-affair", as "Kitten" forthwith nicknamed him, the front door opened and a manservant emerged.

In his hand were some letters, which he posted at the nearest box. Then he returned and disappeared again into the house.

"So Mr. Three Hundred and Fifteen keeps a butler, does he? That's very posh."

"It may be a valet, 'Misery'."

"The great point is—we've seen the manservant. That's good enough for us. We need only throw out a few hints about his general appearance to put the wind up Krajova."

"Anyhow, we'd better be off or we shall get into hot water. We're late already for the rendezvous."

A quarter of an hour and they were sipping preliminary cocktails in Room Number 11 while they recounted to Loschka their recent adventures.

"Aren't you surprised, Loschie?"

"Kitten" had to put the question a second time before the reply came.

"Vairy moch."

But Loschka would have been far more astonished and not pleasantly so, if she could have known what

was taking place in Morris's sitting-room at that very moment.

The telephone had begun to ring and Alderson, at work at his desk, raised the receiver and spoke into the transmitter in his normal voice.

"Mr. Morris's man speaking. Who is that? Monsieur Leblanc?" On hearing the name, he felt vague. It conveyed nothing to him. "Does Mr. Morris know you?" he questioned carefully. "You are the manager of the 'Bon Viver' and have a message? Very good. If you will hold the line, I will acquaint my master at once."

Alderson's tone had been that of a calm, well-trained *valet du chambre*, and he was distinctly pleased with his performance. As he put down the instrument, a slight smile of self-satisfaction appeared in his face.

In portraying the part, he had been able to gain inspiration from the memory of a particularly irreproachable specimen of the species, a fellow of infinite Victorian imperturbability, who had been in the service of his grandfather, old Lord Osterman.

Alderson, in his schooldays, had once been favoured with an exposition from this paragon of perfection on the topic of valets and valetdom.

"They say it takes three generations to make a gentleman, Master George. That's as may be. But what I say is this, to make a gentleman's gentleman takes six generations at least."

The episode passed through Alderson's mind while he waited till a suitable interval had elapsed. Then he returned to the telephone and spoke in Morris's voice.

"The manager of 'Le Bon Viver'? Excellent.

I gather, Monsieur Leblanc, that at last you have news for me"—his eyelids quivered—"of my friend. What is that? Dining to-night and in room eleven? Alone? With three other ladies? Indeed. Friends of Mme. Leblanc at the Censor's? I see. Madame is also there. Quite so. Would it, I wonder, be possible to obtain their names from Madame? In confidence, you understand. Certainly."

A considerable pause, then the manager was again addressing him.

"Besides—Miss—Loschka?"

On hearing the name of the Slav, Alderson cleared his throat to conceal his satisfaction.

"You were saying? Besides my friend, there are: Miss Barton?—Miss Brighten?—and Miss Minton? Thank you. I am greatly obliged. No. No. Say nothing to Miss—Loschka. I will communicate with her direct." The lines of his face hardened as he said this: "What is that? You are right. Not for a long time. Let us say Friday. Perhaps you and Madame Leblanc will join me over a bottle of champagne."

Replacing the receiver, Alderson folded his arms thoughtfully.

So the woman's name was Loschka and she was a censor.

Why had she called herself "One Nought One"? A possible explanation suggested itself, and he turned to the telephone once more.

Half a minute later he was in communication with the Censor's Office. The night staff was on duty, including Crampton, one of Inspector Wilson's men.

"Colonel Alderson speaking. Has Sir Hugo Farningham gone yet? Who is acting? Put me

through, please. That you, Wilbraham? Alderson this end. Oh, no. Very busy, that's all. In my own particular way. *Compree?* Quite. Not yet, but I've an idea I'm nearing the most exciting part. Could I speak to Crampton? Well, yes—it is! You'll have me switched over to my own room, and send him there? Thanks."

A short silence. Then he heard the C.I.D. man speaking.

"Crampton? Good. Ask to see the censors' register, and get me the name against one nought one."

Another pause.

"You have it? L.O.S.C.H.K.A. Now look here. The whole of the correspondence with '101' on the label is to be removed regularly from the outgoing mail and brought to my rooms each evening. Pass on those instructions to the day man. What's that? Oh, yes. In addition to the letters of Number 583, Krajova."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TRAP

WHEN Alderson had thrown Paul Morris in prison, assumed the disguise, installed himself in the Jermyn Street rooms, and entered on his game of Diamond Cut Diamond, there were two methods through which he hoped to achieve success.

Firstly, there was the typewriter whose idiosyncrasies were obviously so well known to all Morris's correspondents in England and abroad, that the substitution of an imitation would have been unthinkable to them.

Secondly, there was the colourless preparation of the Bulgarian chemist by which Morris had for several years of the War, without discovery, conveyed secret messages to his colleagues in espionage.

On entering into unofficial occupation of the rooms, Alderson had found a bottle of this liquid. But only one. No trace of the formula existed among Morris's papers, and analysis in the government laboratories had failed to reveal the identity of a certain highly important ingredient.

Hence, at the very outset, the possession of a fixed and unalterable quantity of the "magical elixir" set a definite limit to his activities in one direction.

His plan had been thought out with considerable care. With Paul Morris in captivity, the code-book discovered in his desk, and the list of spies handed over unsuspectingly by Varaski, it would have been

simple to carry out an entire round-up, and so put an immediate stop to the dispatch of treasonable correspondence for which these enemy agents had been responsible.

Instead of this, Alderson had left the spies free to pursue their activities unchecked, but when their letters reached Salisbury House to pass through the postal censoring routine, they were removed from the mail-bag and subjected to alterations, deletions, and additions. Afterwards they were returned to the mail and forward in due course to their destinations abroad. Other communications addressed to Paul Morris for transmission received similar treatment.

If all these letters were to be accepted in good faith as the original messages from secret agents, who, in the past, had proved reliable, there would be brought about a series of minor, and ultimately of major, miscalculations on the part of the enemy. In course of time these errors would undermine the security of the entire military situation, leading eventually to a complete cataclysm in South-Eastern Europe.

Varaski had returned to his own country with the knowledge that Marie Krajova's censoring number was 583, and an implicit belief that she would never dare to play him false. He felt absolutely protected by his hold on her brother's life, which would be dependent on a good report of her conduct reaching Bulgaria from the supposed "Morris". It had been simple for Alderson to pull the strings so that Marie should be placed in undisputed possession as "sorter" for the room, and in a position to assign herself all letters bearing the names and addresses

contained in the "spy" list with which he had already provided her.

To have these letters bearing her label, 583, on the envelope, abstracted and doctored (after consultation with the naval and military authorities) was no less easy of accomplishment.

Finally, from time to time, entirely without her knowledge, labels marked 583 were affixed to envelopes whose contents had been carefully prepared and specially typed on Morris's machine, with the broad margins filled by long communications written in the Bulgarian chemist's invisible ink.

On the morning following Alderson's conversation with Crampton, he went to the writing-table to continue the lengthy, faked letter on which he had already been engaged.

As he turned the key and slid upwards the roller top, a frown of anxiety came into his face. One glance sufficed to reveal the calamity that had occurred. The bottle containing the invisible ink lay shattered to pieces. What was even worse, its contents had flowed over this paper of the utmost importance which was being prepared for transmission to Varaski. The consequent smudging had destroyed the possibility of using the document.

Only too obvious now was the meaning of the jingling sound of glass which had reached his ears on the previous day when he had slammed down the desk so hurriedly at the unannounced entrance of Inspector Wilson.

While Alderson was shaking his head mournfully, the half-hour struck.

It was ten minutes later when Crampton made his tardy appearance with the letters.

"I brought 101 as well as 583, as instructed, sir."

Alderson nodded, then glanced through the envelopes and in doing so recognized several names and addresses.

"A very nice little collection. Once those have reached their—final destination," there was something very significant in the way he said this, "the results ought to be rather amusing."

"You may be surprised, sir, at my being so late, but the Yard phoned me up to call on my way here. Inspector Wilson asked me to take charge of this package. He said the message was urgent, and preferred to have it delivered by hand."

Crampton glanced towards the door.

Alderson at once dismissed the implication.

"Oh, no, there's nothing to be feared in that direction. Blake isn't that sort of man."

After quickly running his eye over the first page of Wilson's communication, he gave a small grunt of satisfaction, then perused the remainder in more leisurely fashion.

"Thank heaven for that piece of news," and there was immense relief in Alderson's voice.

Then he stole over to the roll-top desk, his footsteps buoyant with exhilaration.

Before closing the curved front he smiled approbation of the broken bottle.

"You'll last out the course all right. Even if you had failed to do so, we could have scrambled home without you—now."

Ending the soliloquy, he once more turned his attention to Crampton.

"I'll be with the Inspector as soon as I've been through these letters. That will do."

"I handed on the instructions about 101's letters. The day-man said he would keep a special look-out as well. One never knows what may happen. He's going to take over Room D 14 from the postal people, so as to be on the safe side."

When Crampton left the house in Jermyn Street, little did he guess that the foreign woman, hanging about in a doorway on the other side of the road, was 101 herself.

As Loschka stared at him, there was no sign of recognition in her face, only an intense concentration, calculated to photograph his features on the sensitive plate of her mind. Entirely ignorant of his identity, yet she considered him worthy of attention through the mere fact that he had emerged from 315.

A few minutes later, she moved swiftly back into the shadow. Alderson had just made his appearance.

"So it was a trick," she muttered to herself, as she cautiously watched him stride towards Lower Regent Street.

When he had passed out of her sight, her brow contracted in thought. It was some little time before she could make a decision. Then she set off by the nearest tube, determined to reach Salisbury House without delay.

But of all this Alderson knew nothing as he walked to the place where Inspector Wilson was awaiting him.

A quarter of an hour afterwards the two men were in earnest conference.

"So Varaski reached the South Coast last night," Alderson remarked, rubbing his hands with an

energetic display of satisfaction. "I can't tell you how relieved I was at getting your message."

"Oh, well. Surely your methods were bound to result in his arrival sooner or later. That was inevitable."

"Granted. And he has come here none too soon—thanks to you."

The last words were accompanied by a shaking of the head, in half-humorous reproach.

"How so?"

Whereupon the tragedy of the broken bottle was related.

"Do you know exactly when Varaski landed?" Alderson asked.

"Too late to catch any train to London, so he arranged to travel up this morning."

"No doubt about that, you think?"

The Inspector seemed very positive of his information.

"We know all about Varaski. You may take that from me. Particulars of his passport, the name under which he was travelling, the route he followed, the boat he took—in fact, the whole bag of tricks."

The reply seemed to satisfy Alderson. A moment's hesitation, then he gave the fateful order which to set in motion the machinery, long made ready, for the moment of action.

"The time has arrived to close the trap."

"When do you wish it done?"

"At once."

A grim smile came into Alderson's face at the thought of the drama he had resolved to stage in London for the coming of the enemy agent.

CHAPTER XXVII

OPPORTUNITY

THE censoring staff had already been at work for nearly two hours by the time the Russian reached Salisbury House.

On entering the room she could almost register a drop in the temperature as Mrs. Johnson greeted her in icy tones.

"Whoever informed you, Miss Loschka, that an alteration had been made in our time-table was under a misapprehension. The hour for commencing work this morning was precisely the same as it has been ever since you received your appointment."

Loschka, who had always boasted of being without nerves, was now but too conscious of their existence.

Only with difficulty did she keep her tongue in check. She found it imperative, however, to give some expression to her feelings. Her shoulders moved heavily with unspoken defiance, and the muscular effort afforded some relief. Her forehead lost its danger signal of irritation, and her tone sounded tactfully apologetic.

She well knew this was no moment for provoking a storm if her decision was to be carried out in the unobtrusive manner which seemed desirable.

"I am vairy sorry, Mrs. Johnson. I oversleep myself and no one did wake me. But to-day I will

not go out to lunch." There was a hint of craftiness in her manner as she said this. "Besides, I will remain an hour after the others have left."

"Very well, Miss Loschka," was the chilly response. "Should you oversleep yourself on another occasion, I hope for your sake that those responsible for calling you will not fail in their duty."

At these words a muffling silence descended on the room, and the massed femininity applied itself to the various tasks of censoring with breathless concentration.

Those who from time to time were occupied in ironing a letter, steaming open an envelope, or submitting a blue slip for approval, glided across the floor with noiseless progress.

For one brief instant glances were exchanged by Kitty, "Smiles" and "Misery", the trio concerned in the adventure of the previous evening. Their decision was evidently unanimous. This was no day for indulging in jokes over Krajova's visit to Jermyn Street.

The clock ticked on with an irritating vigour, and an hour passed. Then the door opened for the advent of the latest incoming mail.

The official in charge paused and looked slowly round the room, apparently in uncertainty where he should dispose of his burden.

"There is a different collector to-day," Nesta remarked with instinctive interest. Her past duties as a sorter had left their trace.

"The other man said nothing yesterday about being transferred, did he?"

The question addressed to no one in particular evoked no response.

The official continued to stand patiently motionless. This went against the grain for Nesta, and she addressed herself to Marie, whose attention seemed to be very fully occupied with a missive of unusual length.

"The new collector is awaiting instructions," the hint was conveyed in a voice tinged with reproof.

"New?" Marie asked in surprise.

After looking across at the man in uncertainty, she pushed among the envelopes at her side the letter on which she had been engaged. Then, rising, went over to him and took charge of the situation.

"Put the bags down by the table in the corner. What have you brought?"

"The mail for the Adriatic and the Balkans."

"Very well."

This part of his duties disposed of, he began to collect the little heaps of censored letters with cautious conscientiousness. As he did so, Marie accompanied him, superintending his movements.

"Only remove envelopes bearing the censor's label. Don't take any letters which have a slip attached. Those are dealt with quite separately and go to other departments."

"Very good, Miss."

When the collector had followed his task at the first table, he turned to her with a questioning expression.

"Now do precisely the same at all the others," she instructed. "There is no need for me to look after you further."

Returning to her own place, she withdrew the

letter from the correspondence under which it had been thrust, and resumed her interrupted task.

The new official continued his round of the room with steady precision until he reached the table where Marie herself was employed.

At this point there began an almost imperceptible slowing up of his progress. His eye wandered warily in advance towards the censor's label on the top envelope of each little pile, before he came forward to collect the correspondence.

"Opened by Censor 101."

When this number met his eye, his gaze lingered over it for a fraction of a second. Then his hand glided forward with a smooth, rather stealthy, movement which was evidently characteristic.

Loschka was in the midst of reading a letter. He stood quietly behind her, waiting till she had come to the end. In due course the paper was slipped into its envelope and one of her labels affixed.

"Thank you, Miss."

As he spoke he looked her straight in the face.

Before departing from Room D 14 he turned his gaze once again in the direction of the Russian, to the immense delight of "Misery", who was a witness of the episode.

"Just fancy your getting off like that, 'Loschie'," she chaffed when the man had gone. "I congratulate you. What do you think he will do next? Say it with flowers?"

Loschka's face remained a blank. The humour was lost on her.

At last she turned her eyes in the direction of the door, then began to think very hard indeed,

while wearing a mask of indifference. Finally, she resumed her occupation.

Marie, for her part, opened the bags and started at once on her duties as sorter.

Now and then during the distribution of the mail, a distinct deliberation entered into her action. When this occurred, the envelope was invariably put aside at a particular corner of the table.

On these occasions a tiny flicker was visible at Nesta's eyelids and a certain eagerness became noticeable.

Nor was she the only one to observe what was going on. Loschka did so, though she gave no visible sign.

At last the sorting was complete. Marie looked up from her work and addressed herself to those in the vicinity.

"Would anyone like the parcels?"

"Me, please."

A prompt, if ungrammatical, response from "Smiles".

"Come on, 'Misery'," the girl continued to her inseparable. "It will rest your optics, and may stop you from grouching."

And so to the sorting-table for the first consignment of parcels. From thence onward, the process of opening, examining, doing up and labelling kept "Smiles" and "Misery" occupied for some time, and thereby their tongues were held from chatter.

In due course, Marie brought a packet to Loschka, who gazed heavily at each envelope as it was dealt out to her.

"You have a good memory, Krajova," the

Russian said at last. "I have already followed some of these cases."

"The handwritings were quite easy to pick out," was the smooth reply.

A moment later Marie came to a sudden stop and hastily withdrew an envelope which she had been on the point of handing over.

"I am following that correspondence myself."

It so chanced that Nesta was a witness of this episode. She was interested not so much at Marie's words, but at the kind of furtive nervousness with which they had been accompanied.

Determined not to give herself away, Nesta forced herself to appear outwardly calm. Nevertheless her hands trembled somewhat as she lit a cigarette and exhaled a contemplative cloud of smoke.

The tobacco had a swiftly-soothing effect on her nerves. Her pulse had sunk from the emotional to the calmly normal, by the time she received a further supply of letters from Marie.

Running the envelopes through her hands with practised rapidity, she affected to be disappointed with the result of the preliminary examination.

"They look a very dull lot. When I was holding your position, I was rather good at picking out interesting letters. Since you took over my work, my luck seems to have vanished."

Marie gave a laugh, short and slightly contemptuous.

"Letters in war-time are all very much the same. At least, so it has seemed to me, since I have been at the Censor's. 'My dear mother'. 'My dear son'. Some of them are like that. As for the rest. There

are only two subjects. The love of business and the business of love."

Nesta gave a little shudder of fastidious disgust.

"And a very ugly business too." Her tone became very definite. "My luck has left me. There is no doubt."

Some minutes later the distribution was complete, and Marie started on her own correspondence so carefully reserved for her own perusal. At first all passed off smoothly enough except for a certain weariness in her manner.

"Headache?" someone queried.

Marie nodded. It was soon after this that she seemed to receive an unpleasant surprise, if nothing worse. On seeing the opening sentence of a letter she gave a start, and then, with set gaze, forced herself to read calmly on. At the end of the first page she turned a look of steady contemplation on Nesta.

"You were deploring your lack of luck, Miss Marling. You should read this communication."

"Is it so very interesting?"

The tiniest hesitation before she committed herself to a definite answer. "A married woman recounting all the virtues of her husband."

"Is that all?" "Kitten" pertly interjected. "Why didn't she use a postcard?"

Marie made no reply, but read further, then passed a hand across her forehead.

"Miss Krajova. Please come here a moment." At the summons from Mrs. Johnson, the Roumanian bit her lip, and put down in the extreme corner of the table, the unfinished letter which she had been examining.

In this position she felt it could not be perused by any of the adjacent censors.

"I have a package waiting to be taken to the ground floor, Miss Krajova. If you undertake its delivery you will have a chance of slipping out for some fresh air. You don't look yourself."

"It is only a headache," Marie answered. "It will soon leave me."

But the D.A.C. proved sympathetically persistent.

"You will be in charge when the staff is out at lunch, remember. Why not slip out while you have the chance and get some coffee? It will refresh you."

"No, thank you."

With lips pressed together in determination, Marie returned to her place quite in ignorance of what had been happening during her brief absence.

In point of fact, as soon as the Roumanian had left to go over to the D.A.C., Nesta had risen from her seat, and strolled past the corner of the table, where the letter was lying. The very first sentences which met her gaze made her heart beat a tattoo.

Swiftly withdrawing her glance for fear of attracting attention, she had gone over to where Loschka was sitting.

"Do you need all the blue slips?"

The Russian seemed surprised at the question.

"None for me, thank you, Miss Marling. Take them all if you wish."

Nesta took one paper only, and left the remainder where they had been lying.

"One slip is ample, as far as I am concerned,"

With a soft laugh, she had retreated to her proper place, and was feigning to be lost in censoring duties when Marie returned from her interview with the head of the room.

Settling down again, Marie took up the letter on which she had been interrupted. Reading it through rather hurriedly, she slipped the document back into its envelope and affixed her label, 583, with a sense of relief.

Was she glad to have completed the perusal of the letter? Or to have shut away the pages from any possible intrusion of prying eyes? Who should say? If Nesta could have thrown light on the matter, evidently she had no intention of doing so.

"Mrs. Johnson kindly suggested that fresh air would help to drive away my headache," Marie announced to all within small earshot. "I think I shall accept her offer."

And so back again to the D.A.C., with a pleasant smile.

"After all, I have changed my mind. You see, it is the privilege of our sex to be variable, and it extends even to Roumanians."

"You are very wise to do so, believe me. Be sure to take the coffee black. Oh, yes. And here is the package."

A swiftly-confidential addition:

"There is really no hurry. It was more an excuse than anything else."

Had Marie known what was to take place in D 14 during her absence, she would not have emerged from Salisbury House with such a feeling of tranquillity.

No sooner had she gone than Nesta Marling smiled

gently to herself and leaned forward on her elbows with an affectation of carelessness, puffing idly the while at a cigarette. Then she turned her eyes to the envelope on which Marie had affixed her label immediately before leaving on the expedition in search of fresh air and coffee.

So much accomplished, Nesta hummed softly to herself, as she brought out a note-book from her bag, settled herself comfortably back in her chair, and made an entry of the name and address which she had just seen.

An act of espionage? Her conscience was at peace on that score. Had not Mrs. Johnson given her a broad hint about "making the opportunity"? The time had come to follow her semi-official instructions.

"Hullo, Marling," joked "Kitten". "Had it nearly slipped your memory to 'book a date' with one of your boys? I never forget that sort of thing."

"And I never forget this sort of thing," came the swift answer as the note-book closed with a snap.

It had been Nesta's intention to put the affair before her fiancé during the lunch hour, and to ask his advice as to the proper course of action.

This, however, was precipitated by the arrival of Barwell, who entered the room at that moment.

After giving Nesta a smile of greeting, he went straight over to Mrs. Johnson and handed her a letter.

"Sir Hugo asked me to bring you this note. I happen to know the affair is very important, as I've come straight from his room,"

The contents had been read with increasing consternation before she asked:

"And this is actually a fact?"

He stopped her from possible indiscretion by a warning look.

"You are to go to Sir Hugo at once. The matter is of the utmost urgency."

"Very well."

There was a note of plaintive protest in her voice.

Rising, Mrs. Johnson scanned the staff, till her eyes came to rest on Nesta. Immediately after Barwell's entry, the girl had gone straight over to the ironing-table in the corner, with a letter. Now, seemingly, she was busy experimenting on it.

"Miss Marling, will you please carry on during my temporary absence?" Then she addressed herself more generally. "If I have not returned by one o'clock, everyone will go out to lunch as usual. During that interval, Miss Krajova will remain in charge of the room, as already arranged."

As soon as the D.A.C. had gone out, Barwell heard the voice of his fiancée calling him in a note of sham apology.

"Might I have your help, please? If it is not troubling you too much."

"What can I do, Miss Marling?" he replied with all due formality.

"Would you mind looking through this document? I'm not certain whether it is in code."

Under the pretence of showing him the letter which she had brought with her to the ironing-table, presumably for testing, she addressed him in a confidential undertone:

"While you pretend to read, listen to what I have to tell you. It's terribly important."

Her back was turned to the others in the room, so that no one could see the movement of her lips as she continued in a whisper.

"A spy letter has been passed through. It's on the long table nearest the door and is lying at the extreme end farthest from where you're standing. The envelope is on top of a pile of censored correspondence, and the number of the label is 583."

"Are you certain?"

"Positive. Don't look round. Somehow that letter must be stopped. It is essential. You must get hold of it, after it has been removed by the collector with the rest of the mail."

"That would be rather difficult," Barwell objected.

"I don't think so," she urged, and handed him a page torn from her note-book. "Here are the name and address on the envelope. It's impossible to make a mistake."

He slipped the paper into his pocket after glancing at what she had written.

"Who is responsible?"

"Marie Krajova, the sorter."

"And the envelope is the top one at this end of the table, you say? Then we'll waste no time. It will be far safer if we act at once. Go back to your own place, and help me if you see the smallest chance of doing so."

Reaching this decision he returned to her the document over which he had been ostensibly consulted.

"That's not code, Miss Marling," he stated in a loud authoritative voice. "You will be quite safe in passing it through exactly as it is."

"Thank you, Mr. Barwell," she responded with a display of formal and almost excessive politeness. "It was most kind of you to advise me in the matter. That was what I wished to ascertain."

"As I am here, ladies," he took in the rest of the room with a sweeping glance, "I can take charge of any letters for the code-room or destruction."

After a meaning look at Nesta, he went to the two special baskets at the table where she sat and cleared them of their contents with a somewhat disturbing fussiness which attracted general attention.

This accomplished, he made the round of the censors to collect anything that might be waiting.

"S'il vous plait."

Madame Leblanc handed him a paper attached to a slip.

Nesta took advantage of all this small disturbance to slide the suspect envelope from Marie's pile of correspondence to her own, after which she clipped it on to a slip. So cautious were her movements while carrying out this plan that they escaped the notice of all her companions. Or of almost all, Loschka was the sole exception.

The object accomplished, Nesta caught Barwell's eye. Instantly he approached her.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Barwell, for your help."

Smiling up at him with an innocent air, she handed over the suspect letter.

"I'm delighted to have been of any assistance," was the polite rejoinder.

Then, bowing to the staff with an air of pleasantly informal authority and cordiality, he took his leave of the room and was gone with the envelope.

Nesta Marling had made the opportunity. What would come of it?

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SPY

WITH a sinister smile Loschka watched the departure of Barwell with the suspect document in his possession. As she did so, one o'clock struck and the censors made ready to leave.

When the door was opened by Madame Leblanc, the new collector was walking past. By chance? Possibly. At any rate, he certainly seemed strangely enamoured of the particular stretch of passage outside room D 14. There appeared a hundred small excuses for busying himself in that vicinity.

It was not long before the bulk of the censors had dispersed.

"Are you not coming, Marling?" Francesca questioned, when on the point of leaving.

"I must wait for Miss Krajova's return," was the polite answer.

Loschka looked up with an apparent desire for helpfulness.

"I shall be here, Miss Marling. I am not going out to luncheon. Like the naughty school-child, I remain to take my punishment."

"Mrs. Johnson left me in charge of the room. I must remain until Miss Krajova takes my place."

However, just then Marie returned from her black coffee.

"Now you are off duty, Marling," said Francesca.

"All the same, Miss Napoli, I'm afraid I cannot lunch with you to-day."

"Then I shall ask Mr. Barwell to take pity on me," came the prompt retort.

"*Touchée*," and the two girls went off giggling. The laughter died away in the distance. Loschka and Krajova were alone.

Without loss of time, the Roumanian began to make a round of the tables, tidying papers, removing litter, replenishing supplies and getting the place into a condition more in keeping with ideas of tidiness.

Loschka watched this progress for a few moments with a look, half-pity, half-contempt. Then with a shrug she dismissed the episode from her thoughts and applied herself to her own concerns.

Hurriedly unlocking the private drawer allotted to her as a censor, she emptied the contents into her own bag. Having done so, she re-locked the drawer, and then, with a sudden and violent jerk, broke off the end of the key so that it could no longer be turned without an implement. A source of delay later on—when!

With a sneer, she rose from the table and made ready for departure.

"Good-bye, Krajova."

There was a note of finality in the words which could not fail to evoke surprise.

"What's the matter? Are you not coming back? I thought——"

"And it is well for you to think. My work here is finished. That is why I leave. If you are wise you will do the same."

"I—I don't understand."

"That is a pity. A great pity. I like you."

Just then Loschka stopped to listen, frowned, approached the door rather nervily and threw it open.

"It is only the collector," Marie observed, and there he was, busying himself with a mail basket.

At first Loschka remained in indecision. Then closing the door, she tiptoed her way over to where Marie was standing and spoke in a low whisper.

"Be careful of the new man." She moistened her lips before continuing. "Marling suspects. Watch your letters. Look well. Think well."

Marie stared in astonishment. As she did so, voices were heard approaching.

"So soon," Loschka muttered to herself,

Looking warily around, she dropped her bag into the waste-paper basket, which was near Marie. Then swept some envelopes after it so as to hide it from view.

"I help you. Now you help me. You say nothings? Yes?"

With swift soft steps, Loschka returned to her place, sat down, and in a loud tone began complaining over the broken key.

Sir Hugo Farningham entered the room, followed by Inspector Wilson and Mrs. Johnson, while the new collector at last left his beloved passage to bring up the rear.

"Oh, dear," exclaimed Loschka, "my key. It has broke."

At a nod from Farningham the Inspector went to her aid.

"Fortunately I have some experience. Let me assist you!"

In half a minute the drawer was open.

"Empty." There was disgust in Wilson's tone. "Been warned, eh? On the point of flitting, I suppose. Oh, well, if you had tried, you would not have come far. My man was waiting for you outside the door."

Loschka shot a furtive glance in Marie's direction as though to say: "what did I tell you——"

But she remained silent, determined to give nothing away unless obliged.

"Is this number 101?" Farningham asked Mrs. Johnson.

"Yes, Sir Hugo."

"Has she been applying for leave to go out during her hours of duty, for the purpose of telephoning?"

"On several occasions."

With that he turned to Loschka.

"You will be given the usual warning, but it is quite immaterial whether you answer questions or remain silent. There is full proof against you in our possession. You are under arrest."

"For what reason? Because I telephone?" she brazened.

The Inspector's hand was placed on her shoulder.

"I arrest you on a charge of espionage."

For an instant the Russian shrank into herself, then essayed a display of assurance.

"All this is a mistake."

Sir Hugo eyed her coldly. "You will be given full details when you have been brought to my room."

As they were about to move off, the new collector addressed Loschka.

"You have forgotten your bag."

"I have none."

The Russian glared at him.

Without troubling to answer her in words, the man pointed to the paper basket. At first Loschka was taken back, then her eye sought the doorway and rested on the small observation panel.

She gave a scowl and a shrug. Then with an ill grace she bent down, retrieved her belongings, and accompanied the C.I.D. man from the room.

"Do you know, Sir Hugo," chattered Mrs. Johnson, as they brought up the rear of the little procession, "I had an idea that something was wrong. Only this morning I mentioned it to one of the senior English censors."

When they had gone Marie Krajova was left in a state of agitation and bewilderment at the unexpected turn events had taken. Loschka's words came back to her.

"Marling suspects. Watch your letters".

If, as seemed evident, Loschka had been a spy at the Censor's all this time, she would have been definitely on the look-out for any unusual happening. Certainly she had grasped quickly enough that there was something odd about the new collector, and she had been amply justified.

"Marling suspects".

The Russian must have had some strong reason for saying so.

"Watch your letters".

Other phrases came to her mind.

"Look well. Think well".

Marie gave a start, as a fear came suddenly upon her.

Apprehensively, she looked towards the pile of correspondence already censored, and bearing her label, 583. The envelope with the name and address

which she knew so well was no longer at the top where she had placed it before going out for that cup of coffee.

Hurriedly she examined in turn each envelope bearing her number. That particular letter was not among them. It had disappeared.

"Look well. Think well".

Now she understood the full meaning of Loschka's warning.

The envelope must have been deliberately removed by Nesta Marling! For what reason? Marie Krajova could guess only too well.

The heart of the Roumanian throbbed as she thought of the possible outcome.

CHAPTER XXIX

PREPARATION

THERE was a sound of hammering in the sitting-room on the first floor of 315, Jermyn Street.

Alderson, still wearing his disguise as Morris, was busy near the fireplace tampering with some metal gadgets fixed close to the wainscot in a position where they would hardly be likely to attract attention.

The light from a movable electric lamp was concentrated on his work, for it was late in the afternoon and the place was in the shadow. The tap-tapping ceased, and he spoke softly into the instrument.

"Can you hear me from upstairs, Blake?" No answer.

Alderson again applied himself to his task. There was another pause, and again he put a question, very slowly.

"Can—you—hear—me——"

Two soft, uncertain thuds came from the room above.

Looking upwards, Alderson frowned with dissatisfaction, then, taking a screwdriver, he tightened certain attachments.

"Is my voice clearer now?"

One sharp blow told him all he wanted.

"Stay where you are, Blake," he instructed. "I'm going to speak from the other side of the room."

With that he crossed to the writing-table by the

window and asked in a voice of normal volume:

"Can you still hear me?"

Another sharp blow was audible.

"Now listen carefully. Go down to the front door and test the buzzer. We must make certain it is in proper order. This may be the last time we shall use it. I mean that. When you get my answering buzz, give two in return and await my acknowledgment. Then come up here. Do you understand?"

A quick response.

"Carry on."

The telephone started to ring. Taking off the receiver he listened. Then:

"Mr. Morris's man speaking."

In another moment he was to give the code phrase.

"Quite correct."

From Alderson's expression, his informant at the other end of the line had some interesting news to deliver.

"Varaski has reached London? I expected that more or less. They phoned me as soon as he left Plymouth. Made straight for Krajova's rooms and is waiting there till she comes in? Is he, by Jove!" And he gave a little chuckle. "Anyhow, we shall be ready for him all right when he comes along to Jermyn Street. Of course, I'm sure. Wasn't that his reason for arriving in England? To have it out with Paul Morris? Oh, yes. He will. You're right. It should be most interesting."

A lengthy communication was evidently being delivered, for Alderson made no interruption. When at last he spoke again, it was nearly five minutes later.

"Very well, then. Phone me as soon as he leaves Krajova's place. If I don't remain down here in the sitting-room, I'll switch the phone up to the floor above. Quite! But then if the two code words were not given straight away, you'd know something was wrong."

Just then the sound of the buzzer reached his ears. "Very well—'That is understood'."

Having given the code finish, he replaced the receiver, went to the door, and pressed a knob setting the answering buzzer in motion. A double buzz came back by way of reply. This, too, he repeated.

Then going to the window, he looked out, drawing the lace curtains cautiously aside. Having held up his hand as a signal to two men across the street, he left the window and lit a cigar—one of "the" brand.

A knock on the door.

"Come in."

It was Blake, awaiting further orders.

"Inspector Wilson may arrive now at any moment. I shall be ready to see him at once."

"Very good, sir."

"After he has come, you are to carry out instructions. You are sure you can remember them?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Whoever comes, I am to show up, and ask them to wait. Is that right, sir?"

"Perfectly. But that is all, so be careful. Should they start questioning you, merely tell them you were to deliver that message."

Blake gave a brisk nod.

"Afterwards, I am to report to you."

"That's right. As soon as you have seen them safely to this room. There may be more than one

caller, in fact, there almost certainly will be. It is possible you may have a surprise, so be prepared. Whatever happens, don't lose your head."

The buzzer sounded.

Alderson went to the window and peeped into an angle mirror.

"Don't wait any longer. That's Inspector Wilson. When our next caller comes, sound a double buzzer and wait for my confirmation before you open the front door. Take your time about doing this. His appearance must follow our disappearance."

As Alderson said this, he glanced in the direction of the room overhead in order to make his meaning clear.

"I won't forget, sir."

"By the way, the next arrival will doubtless be Varaski. You remember him, don't you?"

"Are you really expecting—that—man, sir?"

"I am, Blake. But he is not expecting—me!"

"I see, sir."

The buzzer once more, and Blake hurried down to admit the Inspector.

A few words of greeting passed between Alderson and the new-comer. Then Wilson's eye roved round the sitting-room in a professional manner, until it came on the gadget almost hidden from view.

"So that is how things are." An admiring gaze was turned on Alderson. "You're really a marvel, Colonel, if I may say so. The first time I heard you imitating Morris's voice, it startled me a good deal. But now—! You are absolutely life-like."

"Practice makes perfect, they say," was the reply.

"You've certainly had plenty," the Yard man

commented. "All the same, I don't know how you've been able to keep it up, week after week, month after month. It must have involved a great strain."

"Anyhow, the Spy Hunt will soon be at an end. By this time to-morrow, we ought to have seen the finish."

"It's a wonderful round-up. Going like clock-work. In the space of a few hours, we've completed arrangements for trapping the entire spy organization so carefully prepared by Paul Morris and Varaski. As for Loschka—" the Inspector emitted a short laugh. "Number a hundred and one! The woman over the telephone!"

"I agree it was rather intriguing."

"Rather? Is that all?"

"Extremely, then, if you prefer it. But the game of Diamond Cut Diamond is not yet over. The most shall we say, 'arresting'—development has still to come."

The buzzer sounded.

"There's the signal. It's time to take cover—and await events. You know where to go."

"What about yourself, Colonel?"

Alderson placed his hand on the buzzer to give the signal to Blake.

"I am making for my listening-post upstairs."

CHAPTER XXX

THE THREAT

WHEN Blake opened the front door, it was not Varaski but Marie Krajova who had arrived.

"Are you quite sure Mr. Morris is not in?" she persisted, in an agitated voice.

"That's what I said," he answered, with imperturbable finality, showing her into the sitting-room.

Marie had hastened to Jermyn Street as quickly as possible when the staff of the Censor's had finished their work for the day.

"But I must see him," she protested. "It's most urgent."

"Can't help that, Miss. If he's out, he's out. What's more, the master is expecting someone—well, someone most important. I'm quite certain he wouldn't wish to be disturbed and if I might be excused for making the suggestion why don't you try again, Miss, in about an hour?"

Marie tapped her foot with impatience.

"But there is something he must be told at once."

The butler valet sought inspiration from the ceiling. Or, perhaps he was hoping for sympathetic thought guidance from his master.

"If you're in such a hurry for Mr. Morris to know, couldn't you leave him a note? It shall be delivered as soon as I see the master."

"That would not do at all. I had better wait here until his return."

"I don't think Mr. Morris would approve of that," he urged.

"He will, when he learns why I have come."

At this moment the buzzer sounded.

"Anyhow, Miss, it's too late now. That's the front door," and the servant went down to the hall. Marie frowned at all this delay.

"I am Varaski," the new arrival informed Blake.

"Will you come this way, sir? Mr. Morris said, would you wait."

"How can that be?" The Bulgarian questioned in a tone of suspicion. "Your master did not know that I was in England. No one did know."

Blake oozed geniality.

"Mr. Morris said everyone was to be shown up."

Varaski felt reassured. "Now I understand."

Blake led the way to the first floor, and opened the door of the sitting-room.

"This way, sir."

"I thank you."

As the door closed behind Varaski, he heard his name uttered in a tone of surprise.

Turning towards the fireplace he saw Marie Krajova and a malicious glint was in his eye as he addressed her.

"So this is where you are, Mademoiselle. I waited at your apartment for nearly an hour."

"I am sorry. Had I known, I would have been there to meet you."

Her forehead furrowed. "Why did you come from Bulgaria?"

A hard look appeared in his eyes and a bitterness in his tone.

"Strange things have been taking place in

England. It was necessary to investigate them and to satisfy myself of the truth."

A silence followed, during which he glanced round the room.

"Mr. Morris is not here," she volunteered.

"Like yourself, Mademoiselle, I too have the power of sight," he retorted. "Come over here. I have something to show you."

In his manner there was a command and a hint of underlying threat. As she approached, he produced a bundle of envelopes with censor labels.

"All these have been opened by 5—8—3— You recognize the number, huh?"

"Why do you ask? It is mine. You know that already."

"Does any other censor have the same number?"

She shook her head.

"Suppose a censor was ill for a few days—or weeks?"

"Even then, no one else would be permitted to use the number."

"That is good," and he smiled with a certain grim satisfaction. "Then there can be no doubt all these have passed through your hands."

Slowly he ran through the envelopes for her to observe the 583 on each in turn. Having done so, he continued.

"As you see, the letters of my agents here reached me quite safely in Bulgaria by our regular route."

"It is very clever how you arrange these things."

And indeed she was conscious of experiencing a certain grudging admiration for his achievements in this direction.

"Thank you for the compliment, Mademoiselle.

Let us take this first envelope. Will you please look through the contents? That letter was from one of my agents in the South of England."

Marie scanned it carefully, before committing herself to any comment.

"I remember this. At least—not the details. Only the general drift."

"Since you recognize it, will you be so very kind as to explain?"

"The censoring of those passages?" her answer was prompt. "I followed out exactly what you had arranged with Mr. Morris. Sentences containing figures were to remain intact. The rest I was to black out."

Something in the complacent calmness of her manner provoked Varaski to an outburst which otherwise might have been delayed.

"Do you think I am so easily to be fooled? You have tried to deceive. To double-cross me. The figures in that letter have been altered. Why do you pretend not to understand? My words are plain enough." He clenched his fist threateningly. "It is not all. Where a word began with a capital you changed it whenever possible so as to alter the meaning of the code. You need not deny it. To do so is useless."

Marie stared at him with outstretched eyes.

"You must be mad."

Was her astonishment real or assumed? It was not possible to tell. At any rate, Varaski's anger remained unabated.

"You did the same in this letter. And again in this. You did it in all of them."

"That is not true."

Marie drew away from him, as she spoke.

Suddenly she realized something had been taking place of which she was ignorant.

"You have made a mistake, Varaski. If there are errors, it is absurd to blame me for them."

The Bulgarian's rage died away as swiftly as it had flamed up and an icy calm took its place.

When next he spoke, there was something in his manner which made her shiver with vague apprehension. She experienced the most terrible fear of all, that of unknown danger.

"There is no mistake, Mademoiselle. You must know very well that writing can be tested when there is suspicion. A wrong figure may be the fault of a friend. An altered one is the deceit of an enemy."

She looked into his eyes and saw death.

"Deceit is dangerous, Mademoiselle. Especially when one has a brother."

Marie gave a cry of horror.

"*Mon Dieu!* You believe that I did all this? And you will be revenged on Alexis? But no. It is impossible. You could not do such a thing."

"If you cannot explain, I shall not be revenged on—Alexis alone."

"I—I——"

She ceased to speak, and her fingers began to twitch nervously.

"If you tell me—everything, Mademoiselle, then perhaps— But it must be—everything. Well? I am waiting."

There was a long pause. Then at last she found her voice.

"Suppose your own agents were trying to trick you. Suppose they put the correct figure first and

then themselves altered it afterwards! In that way, if the change were discovered, the suspicion would be thrown on others. If it remained undiscovered, whatever might be their object of changing figures and numbers would be accomplished. Are you sure of your agent's devotion?" she waited for a reply.

"I trust no one—completely! I say, no one! When I discovered that alterations had been made in these letters, I sent someone secretly to test my representatives over here. On his return, I knew with absolute certainty that treachery had taken place *after* the envelopes had been posted by my agents."

He slipped the correspondence back into an inner pocket before proceeding.

"And now, perhaps, you will confess what you have done."

"There is nothing to confess. Nothing, I tell you."

Threateningly he took another step towards her. Then, with a sudden movement, seized her wrists in a metallic grasp.

"Not even that Paul Morris is your lover?"

"How dare you? Let me go. You are hurting me."

Marie wrenched herself free. At her action, Varaski gave a curt laugh.

"It is very simple. You bought Morris with your kisses and persuaded him afterwards to become a traitor to our cause. You shall see the proof."

Before proceeding, he produced yet another envelope.

"Look at the label. Your number again. But in

this letter, you have blacked out—nothing. Shall I tell you the reason?"

"If you wish," Marie answered wearily.

The Bulgarian removed from the envelope several sheets of paper and showed them to her.

"These were typed by Paul Morris himself on his own machine. The one over there. I know its faults—like those of an old friend. Until now—I have loved them. You, too, recognize them, do you not? Answer me!"

"I—" she hesitated, and swallowed. "Yes—I think so."

"It was because of this letter that I have come to England. Why did you change nothing in it? I will tell you. Because all those figures were already incorrect. The whole of the information contained was false."

Marie passed her hand over her forehead, a characteristic movement at times of strain.

"False? How do you mean, Varaski?"

Her question seemed to infuriate the other.

"Do not pretend. You knew well enough of his intention to betray us! Never shall I forget the catastrophe that happened to our country because we believed Paul Morris could never deceive us. A few more such letters and we should be left without army, or guns. In fact, with nothing. We should be forced to surrender without conditions. Our country would be a gap in the armour through which the Central Powers would receive their death-blow, at the hands of the enemy."

It was some time before Marie could grasp the meaning of all this. At last she spoke in a low voice.

"What are you going to do?"

Varaski looked her straight in the eye.

"First, I shall wait for the coming of Morris, and afterwards—" He did not finish the sentence, but strode swiftly across the room.

"Remain where you are. Make no sound, for your brother's sake."

Very softly he moved the door so that a crevice appeared, through which he could peep out at the staircase.

"Paul Morris," he muttered, then drew back against the wall, and waited—his right hand edging stealthily towards his hip pocket.

A few seconds passed and the door was pushed open. Marie gave a cry as a shot rang out and the man who had entered dropped to the ground.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RETURN OF ALDERSON

As Sir Hugo Farningham sat at his desk on the following morning, there came an urgent knock.

"Come in."

The permission was followed by the hurried entrance of Barwell, seemingly in a state of considerable excitement.

"Has there been an outbreak of fire in the code-room?" was Farningham's quizzing question.

"Why, n-no, sir," stammered the young man, somewhat taken aback.

"Then what precisely is the matter?"

A hint of surprise.

"The latest development of the Morris case."

"Indeed?"

"Naturally, it has made a tremendous stir among the staff."

"Really?" was the dry comment.

Barwell stared at his chief.

"But I thought——"

Sir Hugo found it difficult to preserve a straight face as he sought enlightenment.

"Has anything particular happened?"

Barwell blinked rapidly two or three times in succession.

"Paul Morris was shot at his rooms early yesterday evening. I thought, Sir Hugo, you were sure to have heard."

The latter sentence was spoken in a way which caused Farningham to give a quiet chuckle of amusement.

"Now I see the explanation of your behaviour. You came here in the hope that I would be able to pander to your curiosity by supplying additional details."

"As a matter of fact, Sir Hugo," came the somewhat reluctant admission, "the possibility did just cross my mind."

"I'm sure it did," was the bland comment.

Barwell felt rather thankful that Nesta was not present to observe the unheroic position in which he had been placed by his superior.

"It seems to me," Farningham continued, "the staff has been wasting its emotional energy on a rumour which has not the slightest foundation. How could Paul Morris be shot at his rooms, when he was imprisoned months ago on a grave charge of espionage?"

"Morris was released from there yesterday at noon."

The other smiled his disbelief. "If a spy of his importance is so fortunate as to escape the death penalty, he is bound to be kept under lock for the duration of the War, if not for longer."

"Ah, sir, but if I may be allowed to say so, in this case there was a special reason for his being set at large. Something to do with the Secret-Service. As you will remember, the case was taken out of our hands by Colonel Alderson."

"Quite so," Sir Hugo agreed, then made a slight gesture of uncertainty. "If the Intelligence Service is responsible, that would be another matter

altogether. All I can say is, I myself have heard nothing of this."

He settled back in his chair, as an indication for the other to proceed.

"After Morris had been freed, sir, all his movements were to be watched without his knowledge. He was intended to act as a decoy."

"If so, the scheme did not work out very successfully," a tiny suggestion of superiority entered the speaker's voice as he made the comment. It was difficult for one Government Department to avoid a feeling of elation at the shortcomings of another.

"It had not been realized," Barwell explained, "that someone would be waiting to 'get him' when he returned to his rooms in Jermyn Street."

"How did you come to hear all this?" the chief asked, with a considerable display of curiosity.

"From Colonel Alderson. He has just arrived at Salisbury House."

"That amazing man?" the tone became warm with admiration. "Where has he turned up from, I wonder? Travelled over half Europe I dare say, since the last time he visited us. That was—how many months ago? Four, I believe. Possibly more."

His head moved reminiscently. "The day when he had Paul Morris brought here for interrogation in my presence. Do you remember?"

"I'm hardly likely to forget such an occasion, sir."

Farningham drummed on his desk thoughtfully for some seconds. "And now at last he has come here again. What's more, it happens that he has done so on the morning after Morris has been shot

on returning to his rooms from being imprisoned." Pausing, he looked out of the window, then spoke half to himself: "It must be true, if he has said so. But it's queer, uncommonly queer." He turned to Barwell, with another questioning look. "Did the Colonel tell you any more?"

The reply came without hesitation.

"Apparently the shooting was done by a Bulgarian Secret-Service man, Varaski, who had come over on a false passport. He was arrested before he could leave the premises."

"You are telling me a very odd story. Why should he go wasting shots on one of his own people, instead of keeping them for our side?"

"That the Colonel didn't say, sir."

Just then Alderson's voice could be heard in the ante-room. Sir Hugo gave his subordinate a little nod of dismissal.

"Ask the Colonel to come in."

"Very good, sir." At the door, Barwell hesitated.

"What is it?"

"Miss Marling wanted to see you on a matter of—very great importance. It has to do with a spy letter."

"Surely that is a question for her D.A.C. to deal with," Farningham objected. He had ample to occupy his attention, without undertaking matters which could be settled by the heads of the rooms.

Barwell's voice became grave in the extreme.

"I'm afraid, Sir Hugo, it is a great deal more serious than that. The letter was being passed through uncensored. Fortunately Miss Marling was able to prevent this."

The chief's brow contracted as he grasped the seriousness of the situation.

"Prevent? I see." There was a long pause. "Then will you please ask her to wait in the ante-room?"

With that, Alderson was ushered in. Gone were Morris's clothes, his colouring, his voice and his features. The Colonel had returned to that personality which he had abandoned on the day when he entered on his game of Diamond Cut Diamond.

"Events appear to have been moving rather rapidly," Farningham remarked, when the initial greetings had been exchanged. "Barwell has just been telling me some quaint tale about Paul Morris having been let out of prison to fit in with some plan of the Intelligence Service."

"That's perfectly right," the other corroborated. "I knew Varaski was bound to come to England sooner or later, so I thought out the scheme well in advance. You see, it was evident that, as soon as he reached London, he would make for Morris's rooms."

"If you say so," was the rather puzzled comment.

"It struck me that if Morris could be there when Varaski arrived, some extremely interesting topics might be discussed between them."

"There I *am* with you."

"Accordingly I phoned to the Governor of the prison to fix the final details of the release. Afterwards I arranged some gadgets in Morris's chambers so as to listen-in to the conversation of the two spies when it took place."

He broke off to give a sigh of regret. Then quoted the lines of Robert Burns.

" 'The best laid schemes of mice and men gang aft agley'. Unfortunately, Varaski arrived first and lay in wait for him. When at last the owner of the rooms did appear, the first word which passed between them was—a bullet. So you see, in spite of all my trouble, the conversation never took place."

"Hard lines on you," Sir Hugo sympathized. Then put a question very much to his interest. "What about the Balkan Spider? Did he come up to your expectations?"

"He was a bigger 'bug' than I had ever dreamed possible. For all that, though, the last twenty-four hours have seen the wiping out of his entire contraption of secret agents."

"The whole lot?" came the half-incredulous query. "A big statement to make."

A smile of amusement spread slowly over Alderson's countenance. The moment had come when he was to spring his great surprise.

"I ought to know what I am talking about, considering I myself have been impersonating the Balkan Spider for the last few months."

"*You?*" Farningham almost leaped out of his chair in amazed exaltation.

"If one is to learn all about a spy organization, as good a method as any is to become the chief organizer oneself. Besides, didn't I tell you in this very room that I intended to have a cut at it?"

The phrase which had been used on that occasion came back to Farningham.

"Diamond Cut Diamond."

"Precisely. Soon after the game had started, Varaski began to find things going wrong. As time

passed, they went from bad to worse, so I knew he was practically bound to come to England. And now that he has arrived, he is in custody. In fact, he is waiting outside the room at this very moment. I thought you might care to see him."

"Indeed I would."

Sir Hugo was about to put his finger on the bell, but Alderson delayed him.

"When Varaski is questioned, I should like Inspector Wilson to be present. You see, Sir Hugo, he happened to be on the premises when the revolver was used."

"Wilson? He was here only yesterday in connection with a most unpleasant affair. One of the censors turned out to be a spy. A woman called——"

"Loschka!"

The other supplied the name as though there could be no doubt on the subject.

"So you knew about her as well as the rest?"

"Inevitably. She was part of the Balkan Spider's web. Later I'll tell you the story of my experiences with Number 101, they were rather extraordinary. But, first of all, we must get through with the Morris-Varaski affair. If you are ready we will ring up the curtain on the little drama which I have staged."

CHAPTER XXXII

ACCUSATION

"COME along, Varaski."

The Inspector urged the enemy agent on with some impatience, while the hand of the policeman at his shoulder completed the process. Barwell brought up the rear.

"My name is Tomescu. I have already told you so," Varaski protested, with a scowl of defiance. "I am a good Roumanian, one of your own allies. You have my passport. You can read there what is written."

"We know all about that," Alderson responded genially. Just then he was feeling on excellent terms with himself. "In point of fact, it was one of our own agents out in Bulgaria who helped to fake your identity."

Varaski stared. Then his rage boiled over.

"That man belonged to you? Oh! When I get him!"

"When."

From Alderson's tone the prospect did not sound hopeful. Without further delay he produced the passport in question and passed it to Farningham.

"An artistic piece of work, don't you think?"

The examination was made with a display of critical interest.

"Very nice indeed."

"I thought it would appeal to you, Sir Hugo. And

now, Inspector, let us have your story. Never mind how you came to be at Paul Morris's chambers. We may assume it was not entirely by chance, eh—Tomescu?"

"So it was a trap!" Varaski answered with a glare.

The Inspector cleared his throat. He was not averse to making the most of the opportunity for taking a position of prominence.

"On the landing outside Morris's sitting-room there is a large cupboard standing in a recess. It is in the shadow and there happens to be a small peep-hole in the side, facing the door of that very room."

"Another of your gadgets, Colonel?"

"No, no, Sir Hugo. Apparently it had been there for some time. If cupboards could speak, I fancy that one would have a good story to recount."

A glance at the Inspector and the narrative was continued.

"When the front-door bell rang, I made use of this hiding-place. From it I was, of course, able to keep an eye on the landing. In a minute or two the manservant brought Miss Krajova upstairs."

Farningham frowned at the information. The appearance of one of the staff in such surroundings was not very pleasant hearing for the head of the censors.

"I recognized the lady at once, Sir Hugo, from my visit to Salisbury House earlier in the day."

Alderson assumed his most blandly-irritating manner for the second time. "To arrest Loschka. Part of the general rounding up of spies. The way

it has been carried out will appeal to you professionally. This gives details of the names."

The list which he brought to view from an inner pocket was the one which he had received from Varaski at that first meeting in the Jermyn Street rooms.

"But—but—I myself gave this to—to—Morris," and Varaski clenched his fists till the knuckles stood out.

"Remind me to tell you about that incident later. As an Intelligence man, you will be able to appreciate some of the points more than a mere outsider. Especially if you have a sense of humour. Go on, Inspector."

"When Miss Krajova entered, she seemed upset over something. She was anxious to see 'Mr. Morris' at once about some letter that had been lost while she was at the Censor's."

Barwell gave an involuntary exclamation, and Sir Hugo's attention was attracted by the sound.

"Do you know about this?"

"I think so, sir."

Farningham nodded to himself, then turned his attention again to Wilson.

"Almost at once the bell rang a second time, and Blake—the manservant—went down to answer the door. This time it was Varaski. He sounded quite as excited as the lady had been, and was very anxious to ascertain whether Morris was there."

Alderson bent down and spoke to Farningham in an undertone inaudible to the rest.

"Varaski knows nothing about Morris having been in prison. He made the attack on him in Jermyn Street because he thought it was Morris who

had been responsible for all the catastrophes that have taken place during these last months."

"Rather hard lines for Morris to suffer for something he had never done."

"I don't think he deserves much pity."

Their whispered remarks ceased and they turned again to the Inspector.

"Varaski insisted on waiting for Morris's—ahem—return. So Blake showed him up to the sitting-room where the foreign lady was waiting. They had not been very long together before I heard the key grate in the lock of the front door. The sound was followed by the actual owner of the rooms coming upstairs."

"Morris himself, eh? Was there anything surreptitious about his movements?"

The Bulgarian began to look somewhat puzzled by all this. As well he might, being still in ignorance of the trick that had been played on him by the British Secret-Service.

"Oh, no, Sir Hugo," the Inspector answered, "not in the least. He pushed open the door in a perfectly ordinary manner."

"You think, then, that Morris had no suspicion an attempt was to be made on his life."

"None whatever. As soon as he entered the room I heard a pistol-shot followed by the sound of someone, or something, falling on the floor. I left my hiding-place at once, and reached the landing just in time to grapple with Varaski as he was on the point of making a get-away."

"What about the revolver?"

Wilson smiled with professional satisfaction.

"I found it on Varaski with his finger-prints all

over the weapon. So it was useless for him to deny firing the shot."

"The evidence seems conclusive enough to me," Alderson commented.

Sir Hugo leaned forward with rather a worried air.

"Is there any suggestion, Inspector, that Miss Krajova was concerned?"

"In the shooting? None whatever."

"I'm glad of that," Farningham answered thankfully. "Because—she is a member of my staff."

The Bulgarian's lips parted till they showed a gleam of teeth.

"The police officer speaks without judgment. Marie Krajova is very much concerned."

Sir Hugo drew back with a frown of annoyance.

"In view of that remark, an adjournment must be made until Miss Krajova can be present."

At this point, Alderson gave a glance to the Inspector, who hurried away, to return almost at once with the Roumanian.

Sir Hugo greeted her with a restrained politeness and indicated a seat.

"Miss Krajova, there are a few questions I am obliged to ask you. I understand you were in Paul Morris's rooms at the time when he was—shot. Is that correct?"

A slight bow of assent, and he continued.

"Inspector Wilson said there was no suggestion of your being concerned in the affair. As you are a member of my staff, I should like to believe that."

"Thank you." Her words sounded very low.

"Varaski, however, volunteered the information that you were deeply implicated."

Her finger strayed to the golden bangle about her neck, and Varaski sneered as he saw the movement.

"In France, Mademoiselle Krajova, those who are accused must prove their innocence." Farningham addressed her with unemotional calm. "I am ignorant of the Roumanian laws on the point. However, as we are in England, that does not seem to arise. Here everyone has the right to be considered innocent until proved guilty." He shifted his gaze to Varaski. "Now you may proceed with what you were about to say in Miss Krajova's absence."

Marie listened with increasing agitation. While doing so, she eyed Alderson from time to time with a puzzled expression.

Varaski drew himself up with a certain pride in his demeanour.

"I will not deny further what already you would seem to know. Like Colonel Alderson, I am concerned in espionage." A shrug. "Make what use of this you may wish. As for Mademoiselle Krajova!" He turned to her as he spoke, and if a look could kill, she would have fallen dead at that instant, "you shall hear the truth."

"Mind you only state the actual facts," Sir Hugo warned.

"But certainly," the enemy agent smiled back. "Mademoiselle is Roumanian. Charming, brilliant, with a great knowledge of languages. Therefore, we were most happy when she approached one of our—well-wishers in Bukarest."

Marie's eyes flamed fire.

"That's a lie."

Varaski made a light movement. "When our man had brought her safely to me in the Bulgarian capital, it was settled she should enter our Intelligence Department. After all had been prepared, I myself came with her to England in order to consult a certain person how best she might be used to serve our cause. Six months, for our advantage, this was all we demanded. Then she was to return to the Balkans and receive the sum of money, which had been promised."

Marie once again flared out. "It's not true! I swear it is not."

There was mockery in Varaski's face as he ignored the interruption.

"Paul Morris was one of our finest agents in this country. He had organized a unique service, and it was through his influence Mademoiselle became a censor."

Sir Hugo turned to Alderson, uncertain whether to take up the statement or to leave it unchallenged.

"Do not rob him of his little hour," the Colonel counselled in an undertone.

"The work of Mademoiselle was excellently done," Varaski suavely pursued his narrative, "from our point of view, at any rate. After a short while she was appointed sorter to one of the rooms."

"Again by the influence of Paul Morris?" Alderson asked in his most ingenuous manner.

"Certainly," was the satisfied response. "After that, she was able to pick out without difficulty those envelopes containing the letters from my agents. Soon she became very clever at doing what was required. Everything arrived safely with label 583."

During the hush which followed, the Inspector stepped forward and handed a bundle of letters to Sir Hugo.

"At the time of the arrest, sir, the prisoner had these on him."

"5—8—3," Farningham saw the number once again on the envelope.

"I should like you to cast your eye over the first one, Barwell," and he passed it to him for examination.

The opinion was quickly delivered without any suggestion of doubt.

"Code. This should never have gone through."

All eyes turned to Marie, who became white but preserved complete silence.

Sir Hugo spoke into the telephone.

"Send Mrs. Johnson to me at once."

Meanwhile Barwell was examining the document still further, this time through a magnifying-glass.

"It has been submitted to some chemical test which revealed that several figures and capitals had been altered."

Sir Hugo gave a quick nod.

"Proving the letter was treated as suspect."

Barwell, however, was far from satisfied on the point.

"In the ordinary way, sir, it should have been brought to the notice of the D.A.C., and afterwards sent to the code-room. I am quite positive, however, this has never been through our hands."

Farningham looked puzzled. "That seems odd. However, if it is your opinion—" he broke off and tapped a finger restlessly. Then: "While we are

waiting for Mrs. Johnson, you had better examine the rest of the bundle."

By the arrival of the D.A.C., the correspondence was being returned to Sir Hugo.

"What I said of the first letter applies to the remainder."

"Very well, Barwell. Do you remember having seen this before, Mrs. Johnson?"

She glanced through the first paper submitted to her and was prompt to reply.

"If I had ever done so, undoubtedly it would have been stopped."

"And these others? Take your time over them. There is no necessity to hurry."

Because of the hint given, she looked through them in a leisurely fashion, though, in reality, there was not the slightest need.

"After coming out of their test in such a condition, Sir Hugo, these documents could not possibly have been allowed through the post. There must be some mistake. These are not concerned with my room."

"I'm afraid they are," and the correspondence envelopes were shown her, each bearing the incriminating and fatal 583.

"You!"

Mrs. Johnson stared at Marie, unable to credit her own eyes, and waiting for a denial which never came.

"Have you anything to say in reply to that statement?" Sir Hugo asked in a stern voice. "Do you suggest that the D.A.C. of the room gave instructions for these to be forwarded to their intended destination with the rest of the mail?"

A look of misery was in Marie's eyes as she replied to the question.

"I can tell you nothing."

"Do you realize what your silence involves?"

"I—I'm sorry. Mrs. Johnson knew nothing about the letters. She is in no way to blame."

With a frown Farningham took up each envelope in turn, and compared the name and address with the register of spies received from Alderson.

"All these appear in the list of enemy agents supplied by Varaski."

The policeman moved insensibly nearer to Marie. This done, Inspector Wilson handed over to Sir Hugo yet another document.

"This, sir, is the worst of the lot. Far the worst. That is why I kept it apart from the others. As you will see, the label number is precisely the same."

"Good God, and that went through!" was the exclamation on reaching the bottom of the first page. With a deep furrow of anxiety Farningham read on to the finish of the letter, then, pushing it away as though it was poisonous, he fixed his eyes on Marie.

"No doubt, Miss Krajova, you have already guessed that this letter contains a mass of facts relating to the movement of the Allied Armies in South-Eastern Europe, the disposition of Naval units, arrangements for transport in the Mediterranean; munitions and commissariat. To think that all this information reached the Enemy's Intelligence Service—and that it was *you* who passed it through."

"I—I—" Marie glanced round piteously. "May I see the document?" A momentary hesitation,

and then: "This never came into my hands. I give you my oath."

He eyed her with cold contempt.

"There is your number."

"But I tell you I never passed it," she repeated desperately. "I have never seen that letter before. Never! Never." She moved her hand wearily over her forehead—the old trick. "I don't understand. I must think." Then she shook her head hopelessly. "It is no use. I cannot imagine what happened."

Sir Hugo eyed her with incredulity.

"You are unable to explain?"

"I can't. I can't." She shivered and looked into vacancy.

"Place that woman under arrest."

At once Farningham's order was carried out.

Marie gazed wildly about her as though expecting a miracle to happen. At last her eyes fell on Mrs. Johnson, and their pleading message was not in vain.

"Excuse me, Sir Hugo, but would it not be possible for a label to be dropped by one censor and picked up by another?"

"And used?" He answered the question as kindly as possible. "I suppose you have in mind Loschka, the spy who worked in the same room."

"It would be terrible if a mistake were made and not discovered," the D.A.C. swallowed uncomfortably, "until it were too late."

Sir Hugo fell into a reverie. Such an error was perhaps possible. Could there be a mistake? Then something came into his mind. With the sudden element of surprise, he rapped out a question.

"What happened to the letter you have lost?"

"Letter? I—I—" her voice died away into nothing.

Marie's conduct strengthened his suspicion. His tone had hardened as he spoke again.

"On your arrival at Morris's rooms yesterday, you were very upset about the disappearance of some letter. The Inspector heard you, so it is useless to deny it. What was there to disturb you so much?"

He waited for her to answer him, but she remained silent.

"What was in the letter? Who had written it? To whom?"

At last with a shrug of contempt he turned from her and the sight of Barwell reminded him of the request, made earlier.

"Ask Miss Marling to come in."

In a few seconds the girl was before him.

"I'm ready to hear what you have to say, Miss Marling. I understand you have intercepted a spy letter which was being passed through by another member of my staff."

"I have the document here, Sir Hugo."

Before taking it, Farningham felt it incumbent on his position to emphasize a certain aspect of the case.

"You are aware, no doubt, that it is quite without precedent for any censor to interfere with correspondence dealt with by another."

"It was on my authority that Miss Marling acted," Mrs. Johnson interposed.

The chief was somewhat surprised at the interruption.

"On yours? I see. Then I take it you suspected

something was wrong. In any case, Miss Marling is relieved from the blame for what she has done." He smiled in the girl's direction. Truth to tell, he himself felt not a little relieved at the turn the episode had taken. "Let me see."

As the envelope met his eye, the fatal number was there yet again. "5—8—3. No doubt this is the letter to which Miss Krajova was referring."

As he read the contents, his face left no doubt as to the decision at which he had arrived.

"Miss Marling, you have performed an invaluable service in helping to unmask an infamous spy."

At his words, Marie gave a heartrending cry and reeled. Alderson sprang forward just in time to catch her as she was sinking to the floor in a fainting condition.

Supporting her to a chair, he handed her over to the ministrations of Mrs. Johnson. Then spoke:

"Diamond Cut Diamond is a dangerous game to play. Sometimes one cannot win without causing suffering where one would rather have avoided it. The time has come at last, when the full truth can be revealed."

CHAPTER XXXIII

DISCOVERY

IN response to a sign, Inspector Wilson slipped unobtrusively from the room and returned with Paul Morris.

The man was pale, bandaged, weak from loss of blood, but still alive, to the obvious disappointment of Varaski, who had been arrested before there was any chance of examining the victim and, therefore, could only hope for the worst. That this should not have occurred was particularly distressing.

"Why have I been brought here?" There was infinite weariness in Morris's voice as he asked the question.

At the sound Marie stirred, opened her eyes, looked at him in wonder, and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Then you are not dead!"

"By good fortune, I am not," he stared at her blankly before he answered. "But who are you? And what interest is it of yours?"

Marie was puzzled at his words. "It is you. Yet, somehow, it is not you. Something about you bewilders me and makes me feel confused."

But Morris was far more bewildered. To the best of his knowledge he had never seen her till then, and could make nothing of what she had just said.

"What is your name?"

She drew back a little nervously.

"Marie Krajova. You know that quite well."

The strain of what she had gone through had told on her, and when she continued there was something hysterical in her manner.

"It must be you. Tell the truth. At first you asked me to keep silent about—everything. But now—*Mon Dieu!* You—must—speak. Don't you see how you are torturing me? Why do you look at me as though you did not know me?"

"Because I have never before met you."

At these words Varaski was provoked to take a part.

"What is this new game, Morris? Next, perhaps, you will be swearing you have never before met *me*."

A shrug preceded the response.

"Most certainly. And I do not understand how you know I am Morris."

"*B—but—*" Varaski almost stammered, so taken aback was he by this unbelievable turn of events—"Only a f-few months ago we three met in your own rooms at Jermyn Street."

"We? You are crazy."

Varaski shook his head from side to side with hopelessness in his face.

"It is you who must be crazy, Morris."

Now Marie joined once more in the astonishing discussion.

"He is *not*—Morris. Who he actually is, I do not know. He would never tell me. But one thing I do know. That—is—not—his name."

"Of course it is," Varaski contradicted. "He is Morris, the traitor. The man who betrayed his native land."

"How dare you?" Infuriated at the accusation, Paul Morris tried to wrench himself from the policemen's restraining hands.

Varaski smiled contemptuously.

"I repeat, 'you are a traitor'. That is why I came from Bulgaria to kill you. Because of the final letter you sent through to me, full of figures that were wrong and facts that were false. Everything you wrote was lies. Lies!"

"I know of no such letter," Morris protested. "As for you, I don't even know who you are."

"Who else—but—Varaski?"

"You? How can I be sure?"

At this point a mocking laugh made them turn to where Alderson was standing.

"I am afraid," he explained. "It is I who have been responsible for all these little mistakes and misunderstandings."

In speaking the Colonel used the voice which had now grown into so exact an imitation of Morris's.

"It was you all the time," Marie gasped, then burst into tears of relief.

Alderson came forward, intent on clearing up the position without further delay.

"It was I, and not Morris, whom you met in his rooms that day. I was in disguise. As it so happened, we had formally arrested Morris himself as a spy a few hours earlier. Ever since then he has been in prison, until yesterday, when he was released on my instructions."

"Do you mean to tell me, instead of Paul Morris it is you who have been responsible for all that has happened during these last four months?" Varaski demanded.

Alderson was beginning to enjoy the situation.

"Precisely. It was I. As for Morris, he is as innocent as a babe—over this particular affair, I mean. And how did you reward his sublime innocence? By trying to kill him on his very first day of liberty."

Paul Morris had been listening to all this dumb-founded. Now he tried to throw himself on Alderson.

"I said I'd get you."

But his efforts only met with failure.

"Instead," was the quick retort, "I have succeeded in getting *you*. Never mind, during your little drive to the prison, you and Varaski shall tell each other exactly what you think about me."

A threatening look came into Varaski's face.

"Listen carefully, Colonel Alderson, and then think well. If I do not arrive safely in Bulgaria within one month of having left England, do you know what will happen? The brother of Marie Krajova will be shot."

"Alexis—" she gasped, horror-stricken at his words, then saw in the eyes of Alderson a message of hope and pity, and a wonderful feeling of calm came over her. "You will save him for me. You promised to do so. Something tells me you will be able to protect Alexis from that man."

She received a reassuring look. "I kept my promise. Your brother is already beyond the reach of harm. One of our agents made arrangements for him to escape from the prison the very day Varaski started for England. Only this morning I received a telegram announcing your brother's safe arrival at him home in Bukarest."

In a transport of happiness Marie read the message handed to her.

"Oh, thank you, thank you."

With a feeling of overwhelming relief, she touched the golden bracelet about her neck where the paper was still concealed. For her brother's sake she had not dared to destroy it.

"I fear August is not exactly your lucky month, Varaski." There was a note of exultation in Alderson's voice as he administered the final blow to the Bulgarian Secret-Service man.

"A few minutes before entering this room I received a telephone message which may surprise you. I'm very much afraid that you no longer enjoy the confidence of your country because in this instance they seem to have taken certain steps without your knowledge."

Varaski moistened his lips. What was this about his own people having lost trust and acted behind his back? Did they lay all the disastrous events of recent months to his charge? If it were true, a monstrous injustice had been done.

"It will surprise you, I think, to hear that two Bulgarian diplomatic agents have arrived in England anxious to initiate terms of peace. A month from now—or let us say, at the end of September—Bulgaria will have laid down her arms. After that—I don't wish to pose as a prophet—but I really believe it won't be so many weeks before the Great War has come to a termination, with Victory where we want it to be."

A gesture of dismissal and Varaski and Paul Morris were taken out of Farningham's rooms in custody.

Sir Hugo looked from Alderson to Marie Krajova and back again.

"Amazing. And from your expression I see there is yet more to tell."

A meaning glance passed between the pair, then Alderson spoke.

"Marie Krajova is not a spy. She never has been. After Varaski left us together in Morris's rooms that day, I learned of the hideous bargain he had tried to force on her. I dared not disclose my actual identity. I could only assure her I was trying to help both England and Roumania. I asked her to trust me implicitly and to do whatever I asked, but I warned her that in no circumstances whatsoever must she reveal our secret, otherwise, it might bring disaster on both our nations."

"I begin to understand," Farningham said softly.

"You have heard to-day how Marie Krajova kept her word—even when she thought the man was dead to whom she had given it."

Sir Hugo rose to offer his hand in friendship.

"I am sorry to have misjudged you as I did. I ask your pardon."

"There is no reason for apology," she answered. "How could you have thought or acted otherwise?"

"As for that letter," Alderson resumed. "Miss Krajova spoke the truth when she said she had never seen it before. I myself placed the label 583 on the envelope, and had it introduced among the censored letters of the outgoing mail."

"No wonder I couldn't make out what had happened," was her relieved comment.

"As for the other letters, Sir Hugo, the arrangement between us was that Miss Krajova should pick

out all spy letters and treat them exactly as Varaski had instructed her, then leave the rest to me. Her censor number on the label insured the letters being removed from the mail by one of our own men and delivered to me at Jermyn Street for—suitable treatment. Afterwards, these letters were reintroduced into the mail and sent off on their little journey to Varaski. The procedure was quite simple, you see, and—if I may say so—fairly effective. Even the enemy agent who has just left—in the company of Inspector Wilson—would hardly have travelled all the way from Bulgaria for his health.”

Sir Hugo transferred his attention to Nesta.

“There is no need for you to wait any longer, Miss Marling. There is a hungry look in Barwell’s eyes. I rather fancy he is anxious to take you out to lunch.”

“They may have a hungry look, sir, but it is not for lunch. The fact is——”

It was Mrs. Johnson, however, who made the actual announcement.

“Those young people have asked for the day off, to-morrow, Sir Hugo. Very wisely—or very foolishly—they are going to be married.”

“Congratulations, Barwell. And you, too, Miss—er—that is——”

“It’s all right, Sir Hugo. My fiancé has learned the dark secret of my birth.”

“In that case, perhaps, you will allow me to break our compact for once, Lady Nesta. By the way, I don’t think I shall betray official secrets to an undue extent, if I mention a little rumour which concerns Mr. Barwell’s future. In view of the remarkable results obtained from his invention, a

certain recommendation has gone through—so I understand! In fact, within the next three months, I shall hope to give myself the honour of calling on Sir John and Lady Nesta Barwell!"

A small buzz of excitement followed the announcement. The engaged couple caught one another's eye, and then that of the D.A.C. The same question was put by John and Nesta at the identical moment.

"Lunch, Mrs. Johnson?"

After the trio had departed, Sir Hugo turned to the two who still remained.

"My time seems destined to be spent in congratulations, Miss Krajova, you have certainly dealt with the Morris case in a most brilliant way, and you will find England not unmindful of your accomplishment in her service."

"You are very kind, Sir Hugo."

"I am only saying what I think. As for you, Colonel Alderson, I am simply at a loss for words to express my opinion."

"Your silence will suit me admirably. I always was a retiring man."

Farningham found amusement in the final phrase.

"Retiring? I hope you have nothing of that kind in your mind."

An emphatic headshake answered him.

"Good. That being so, now that your Diamond Cut Diamond game has been brought to such a successful conclusion, what is next to happen?"

"I should like to keep the same partner for my next," was the sly response.

"What do you say to that, Miss Krajova?"

Marie was very diffident as she addressed Alderson.

"Are you sure you wish it?"

"Positive. But I ought to warn you about one thing."

"What is that?"

"This time I propose to start the game with a heart call."

"Do you wish your partner to leave it?" Marie asked with a mischievous twinkle.

THE END

REPARATION

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by

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